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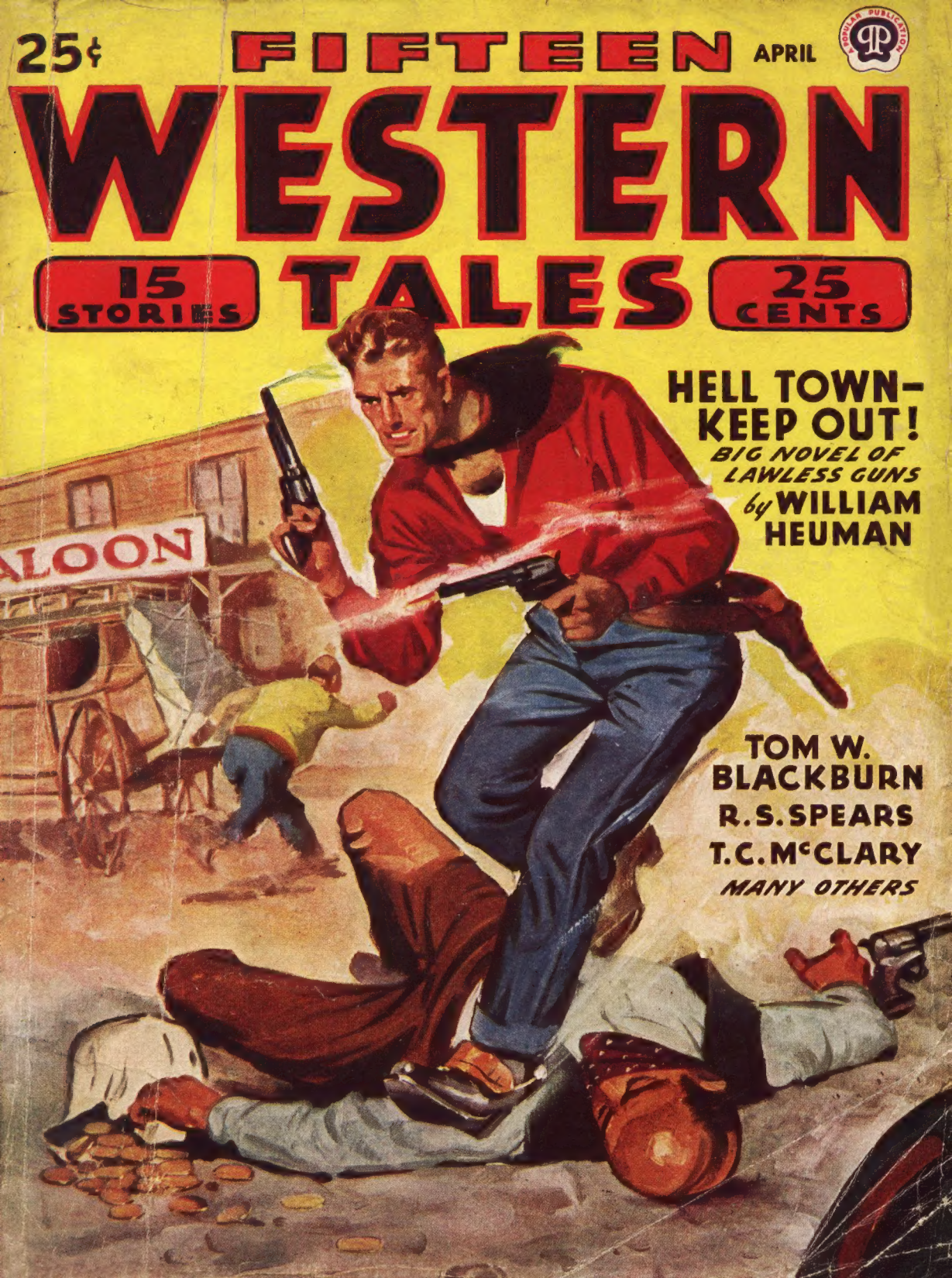

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• ON THE TRAIL •

THE tall marshal, his long hair falling down on his shoulders, thrust his way through the swinging doors of the saloon and stepped out into the cool of the evening with a gunman who had refused to obey Abilene's law that no one could wear a gun inside the city limits.

Two men were near the other end of town when, inside a building a drunken cowboy caterwauled like a panther after the kill.

In a flash the first man whirled on his heel. Bill Hickock's hand was like a fleeting shadow as he drew his gun. "Take your pistols off," he ordered brusquely. "You're under arrest."

The smile on the youngster's face was a humorless, slitted grin. Gingerly he took his Colts with his fingertips, offered them butt first to the law officer. Hickock reached for them with his left hand.

Almost as if by magic, the guns spun in the dexterous hands, and the muzzles snarled like black mouths of death in Hickock's face.

The quiet, tense voice of the boy was like the cut of a quirt. "You dirty killer! You'd have killed me with my back turned if you'd gotten the chance!"

Hickock shook his head. "Wes Hardin, you have been misinformed."

A crowd gathered. The young gunfighter threw back his head, and his voice reached to the fidgety back rows of the mob. "This is my fight, and I'll kill the first man that fires a gun!"

Hickok took advantage of the opening. He grinned. "You are the gamest and quickest boy I ever saw. Let's go somewhere and have a drink. I'd like to talk to you and give you some advice."

An ominous sneer tugged at Hardin's straight mouth. Abruptly, he dropped his guns and holstered them. "Let's go."

Over the drinks that followed, Hardin and Hickock healed their differences. Hardin, the reckless young gunman from Texas, had been primed by Phil Coe and Ben Thompson, two saloon owners and small-time badmen, to get rid of Hickock. They had assured Hardin that Wild Bill meant to kill him to add to his own reputation. Hickock must have been as fast with his tongue as his gun, because he convinced Wes that he had no designs on his life.

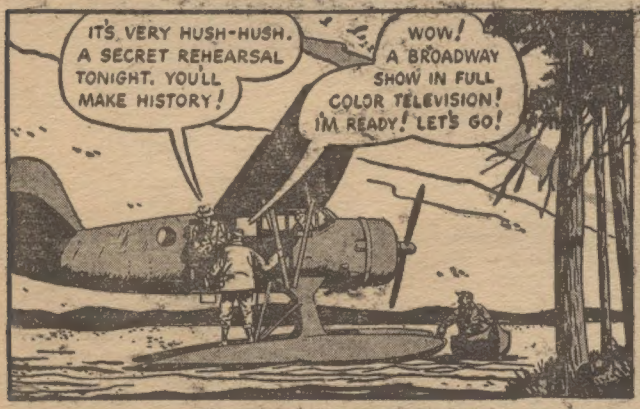
Trouble follows a reputation; however, and the very next night Hardin got in a fight with another desperado, shot him through the head and rode thirty-five miles in his underwear without stopping. He apparently did not want to test Hickock's good intentions too thoroughly.

HARDIN'S early background was much better than is usually associated with men who live outside the law. His father was a Methodist preacher and later a lawyer. The political background of Hardin's time had much to do with his career. Born in Bonham, Texas, 1853, he was brought up during the Reconstruction period in an atmosphere of bitter hatred toward everything Northern. The authority of the law during those days was backed up by blue-coated soldiers, and to most other Texans, as well as Hardin, its dictates were to be obeyed only when it did not interfere with personal desires.

Wes was only fifteen years old when he killed his first man, and knowing that it meant

(Continued on page 8)

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...



(Continued from page 6)

certain death to be tried in courts run by "bureau agents and renegades," drifted from race track to race track, making his way by gambling and betting on the horses. After a short flurry in a business with a relative, he got into a gunfight with a bully by the name of Bradly and put an end to his opponent.

Shortly after this escapade, Hardin made his way toward Brenham, Texas, but stopped to spend the night in a little town known as Horn Hill, where a tough tried to taunt the boy into using his gun. He succeeded—Wes shot him through the head and escaped.

He headed for Louisiana, where he hoped to make a fresh start. On the way he was arrested in a case of mistaken identity. He made a successful break—but killed three men in the ensuing melee.

Really on the dodge now, Hardin headed for the Mexican border and took a job as a cowhand within eye-range of the Rio Grande. He could no more avoid trouble than most men could avoid eating, and within a few days he outdrew and killed a crooked Mexican monte dealer.

In February of 1871 Hardin and a group of other men took up the cattle trail and the desperate pattern of his life continued. After a fight with a rival trail driver's outfit, Hardin killed five men who attempted to ambush him. He was now eighteen years old, and it was only a few days after this that he pulled his guns in the face of Wild Bill Hickock's artillery in Abilene.

AFTER Wes made his thirty-five mile dash out of town, without food and guns, he waylaid his pursuers and sent them trudging back into town under a blazing Kansas sun—in *their* underwear!

By this time every gunman in Texas was attempting to take a shot at Hardin, and he walked in constant danger. In Comanche, Texas, a supposed friend cautioned Hardin that it was against the law to carry a pistol.

Hardin threw back his coat to show he was unarmed—actually he was carrying a short Colt in a shoulder holster.

At that moment, Dave Karnes, the sheriff of Comanche, yelled out. "Here comes that damned sheriff from Brown County!"

The latter was Charley Webb, a gunman who had sworn to kill Hardin on sight.

Hardin turned and faced Webb, who stopped five paces away, holding both hands behind him.

Never one to mince words, Hardin asked, "Do you have papers for my arrest?"

"I don't know who you are," Webb replied.

"My name is John Wesley Hardin."

Webb's eyes never left Hardin's hands. "Now I know you, but I have no papers for your arrest." He brought his hands into view—holding a half-smoked cigar.

Hardin smiled slightly. "Won't you join us in a drink or have a fresh smoke?" He turned to enter the saloon—then whirled and ducked, as Webb drew. Hardin's gun was out and fired almost with Webb's. The deputy sheriff took Hardin's shot through the brain. Webb's shot had gashed Hardin's side.

Turning to Karnes, Hardin offered his gun. Karnes shook his head and Hardin and his friends managed to make their escape. At his father's home Wes again offered to surrender to Karnes, but the sheriff refused to accept responsibility.

Hardin left Texas and went to Florida with his wife. Trouble came to him like steel to a magnet, and he killed a man who attacked a sheriff. This one time at least his killing was condoned by the law.

Masquerading under the name of Swain, he was finally trapped in a train on his way from Pensacola, Florida, to Alabama, on July 23, 1877. The charge was murder for the killing of Charles Webb.

It was bitter irony that a verified case of self-defense was used to sentence him to twenty-five years at hard labor. He was twenty-five years old and was said to have killed a man for each year of his life.

After several desperate but futile attempts to escape, Hardin took up the study of law and became a model prisoner. After serving sixteen years of his sentence, he was released in 1894 under a pardon granted by Governor J. S. Hogg.

The former gunman moved to Gonzales, where he practiced law for a short time.

The *El Paso Daily Herald* of August 20, 1895, gives the following account of his death, which came, as he had lived, by violence.

> Last night between 11 and 12 o'clock San Antonio Street was thrown into an intense state of excitement by the sound of four pistol shots that occurred at the Acme Saloon. Soon the crowd surged against the door and there, right inside, lay the body of John Wesley Hardin, his blood flowing over the floor and his brains oozing out of a pistol shot wound that had passed through his head. Soon the fact became known that John Selman, constable of Precinct No. 1, had fired the fatal shots that ended the career of so noted a character as Wes Hardin, by which name he was better known to all old Texans.

Selman said he killed in self-defense. Witnesses testified that Hardin had made no move to pull a gun, although he carried two. Selman did not long survive the encounter. He was killed a few months later by a United States Deputy Marshal, George Scarborough, in a quarrel over a game of cards.

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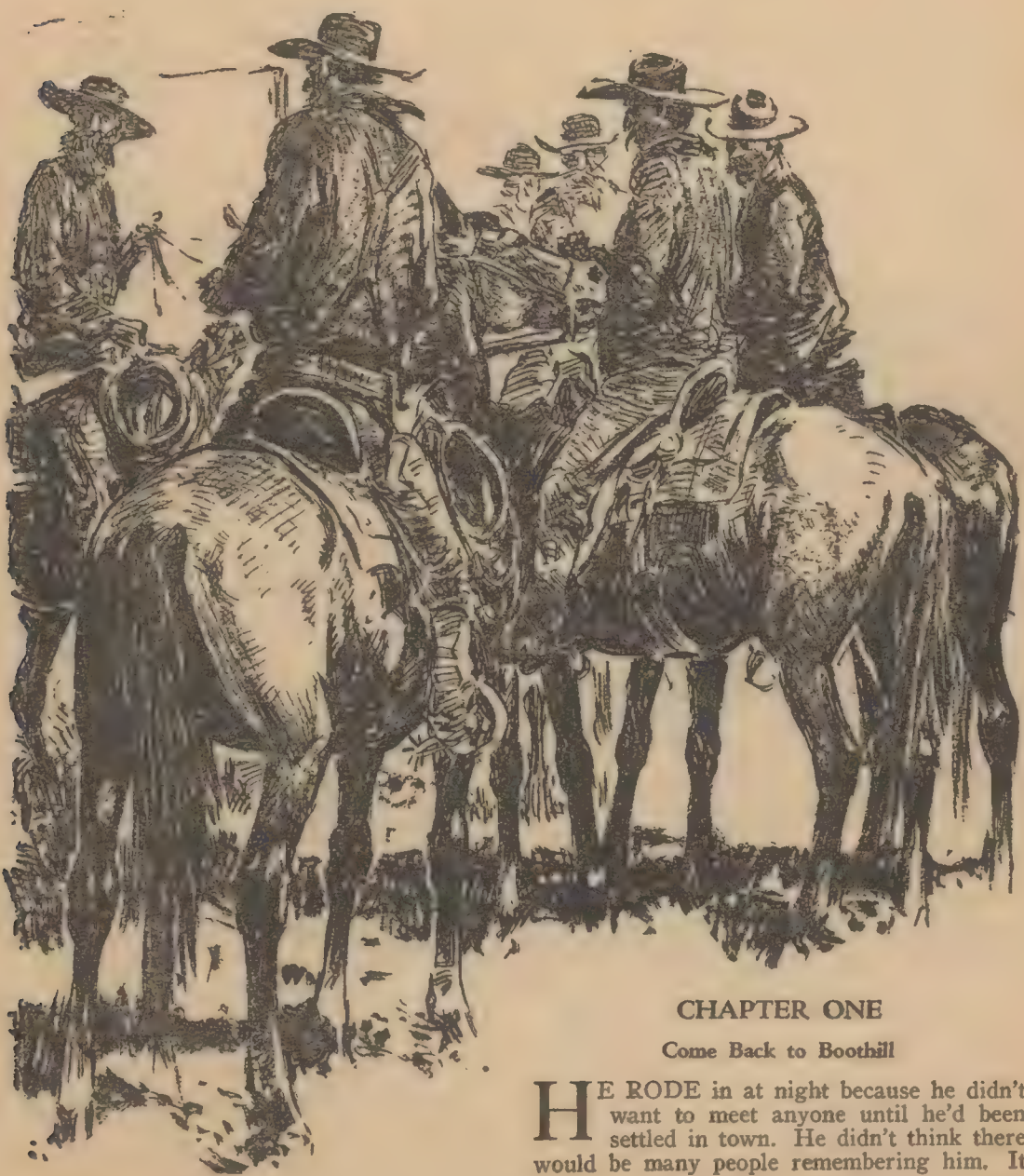
Wade Conroy winced as the shot went through Birdie's right eye. . . .

Once you've killed to live, Wade Conroy found—you've got to live to kill!

KEEP OUT!

By
WILLIAM HEUMAN



CHAPTER ONE

Come Back to Boothill

HE RODE in at night because he didn't want to meet anyone until he'd been settled in town. He didn't think there would be many people remembering him. It

had been twelve years since he'd ridden away to enlist in the Army of the North.

The years had wrought a striking change in the town of Bowman. The railroad had crept an additional two hundred miles from Gray City, to make Bowman the new terminus —jumping off place for the nesters swarming onward, and the rail-head for the cattle drovers coming up from Texas. Still, the main street was much as he remembered it.

He listened to the faint sounds from the other side of the railroad tracks as he rode. The north side was dead at sundown, but the south side was booming. He could hear the music from the hurdy-gurdies and the shouts of the barkers outside each saloon. Six-guns cracked at intervals and above all this, like the rumble of distant thunder, was the mournful bellowing of thousands of cattle in the stockpens outside of town.

A glow of light hung over the south part of Bowman. Wade Conroy had been watching that glow for three miles since he'd come over the low Watchman Range to the north. From force of habit, even though he was tired from the long ride, he sat erect in the saddle, a rangy man with square-set shoulders, face deeply-lined, brooding gray eyes. He rode the chestnut horse with his hat well down over his forehead, but he could see several men standing on the porch of the Washington Hotel, watching him suspiciously, and one man had his hand on his gun as he stood behind one of the pillars.

Wade drew on his cigarette and considered this fact. The building beyond the Washington Hotel would be John Bradford's General Store. It had been a one-story building with a false front when Wade rode away, but Bradford seemed to have prospered. A new structure had gone up here—two stories high, occupying the entire corner. In view of the appraisal he was getting he'd put off seeing John until tomorrow.

John, and Ellen Bradford—he'd have to wish them luck, and have to laugh and pat her two children on the head. And he'd have to be thinking all the while that all this should have been his.

A man came out of a stable opposite the Bradford store, and took a position in the shadow of the entrance way. It was then that Wade noticed several of the windows in the store had been smashed. Oil lamps burned in some of the houses along the street, and there was enough light for him to see now other signs of violence. The barber shop just beyond the livery stable had no glass in the front at all and boards had been nailed across the opening.

Curiosity made him pull up.

The man in the stable entrance moved over to the edge of the boardwalk and called quietly:

"Keep movin', friend."

Wade took the cigarette from his mouth and flipped it into the heavy dust of the road. He watched it sizzle out and emit a tiny shower of sparks. Far to the north he could hear a train whistle blowing fitfully.

"Now," Wade said, "I figured this was a free town, brother."

HE HEARD boots shuffle on wood and out of the corner of his eye saw the three men on the porch of the Washington House come down to the road. He felt the old tingling sensation along his back and a small smile slid across his brown face. It had been a long time since he'd faced danger of this or any other kind. The northern border had quieted down since General Miles chased Sitting Bull up into Canada, and the other big Sioux chieftains, Crazy Horse, Gall, and Spotted Tail had come into the reservation.

"You found your way over here, mister," the man at the curb said grimly. "Reckon you kin find your way out."

Wade nodded. "Mrs. Blaine's boarding house still doing business?"

He was rewarded with a suspicious stare.

"Mrs. Blaine died six years ago," the man told him.

Wade accepted this fact without emotion. He'd expected to find many of the older folk gone and new people taking their places. But a memory had gone with Mrs. Blaine. When he'd been courting Ellen Townsend, now Ellen Bradford, he'd stayed with her.

He was brought out of his hesitation by the sound of a shot from the near side of the tracks, followed immediately by a wild whoop.

A man on the hotel porch yelled suddenly, "They're comin' in!"

Wade heard the quick drive of horses' hoofs. Other guns were banging now, and a dozen riders whirled in from an alley, yelling drunkenly, shooting into the air. They spurred toward the group in front of the hotel, and Wade saw the men backtrack indoors. A man on horseback lifted his six-gun and sent three slugs through an upper floor window of the hotel. Wade reined his chestnut easily into the shadows of the stable and, when he'd done so, saw that the man who had stopped him was gone.

Still yelling, the riders pounded down the main street. Wade watched them complacently, leaning forward a little in the saddle, despising the townsmen who had scattered when the firing started. He saw another of John Bradford's windows go through and thought of Ellen in there with her children. Bradford didn't come out.

Wade Conroy's eyes flickered and he lit another cigarette. He hadn't been aware of

the fact that John Bradford was a coward.

A light flickered above the store and Wade knew an oil lamp was being lighted. One of the riders, careening wildly down the street, pulled up suddenly outside the house, eyeing the upper floor of the house.

"Not that one, bucko," Wade said quietly. The rider was not more than ten feet away, but he had not seen Wade in the shadows. He whirled now.

"Who in hell is that?" he growled.

Two others pulled up and one said tersely, "Strike a match, Birdie."

A small man on a black and white pinto horse rode over, weaving a little in the saddle. He pulled up with his knee touching Wade's and struck a match. Wade Conroy smelled liquor on him. When the match was held close to his face he blew it out calmly, but not before he'd caught a glimpse of a narrow, bird-like face, beaked nose, and small, squinting eyes.

Wade was not quite prepared for the next move. The little tough pushed his pinto up against Wade's chestnut horse. He kept pushing, driving Wade up on the walk, nearly unseating him.

"I'll push you right out o' this world," Birdie roared gleefully. "I'll push you out o' this world!"

Regaining his balance, Wade reached out with his left hand, grasped the little man by the shirt and jerked him out of the saddle. With his right hand, he slapped the tough's face a half dozen times before letting him slide to the ground.

Screaming profanity, Birdie staggered dazedly to his knees, jerking at his six-gun.

"Hold it," Wade snapped. He was wearing his own big Navy Colt, but he didn't want to be forced to use it on this drunk.

Birdie lurched to his feet, lost his balance again, and fell back into a patch of light coming from the Bradford window. Wade could see the little man's eyes blazing furiously, mouth twisted in hatred. He called out another warning, but Birdie whipped out his gun and fired, the slug tugging gently at Wade's left sleeve.

Wade leveled the big Navy calmly, intending to shoot at Birdie's right shoulder, disabling him. As he squeezed down on the trigger, the little tough lurched again, falling directly in line of the bullet. Wade Conroy winced as the slug went through Birdie's face, under the right eye. He knew the man was dead even before he hit the dust. Birdie's shoulders were hunched in peculiar fashion as he fell. His hat was hanging to one side. When he crumpled in the road he did not move.

Instinctively Wade cocked the hammer again, his eyes shifting to the other riders. The men who had gone up the street were coming down again at the sound of firing. The two men who had been with Birdie were staring down at the dead man, both of them motionless in the saddle. Neither man had attempted to draw when the firing started—the thing had happened so swiftly that they hadn't had time to gather their liquor-ridden senses.

A rider spurred up, dropped out of the saddle and bent down over Birdie for a moment. He straightened, looked up at Wade, sitting motionless on the chestnut horse.

"What kind of hell is this, stranger?"

"Sorry to break up the fun," Wade told him. "I didn't mean to kill that hombre. He fell into the bullet."

THE man standing over Birdie Karnes was stoop-shouldered. He wore a flat-crowned, black sombrero and stood with his back to the light.

The man said grimly, as though making a threat, "Birdie was a damned good friend o' Bill Manton's."

Wade heard one of the windows in Bradford's house go up, but still John Bradford didn't come down. Wade kept the three men carefully in front of him, wondering what action they would take. Other riders were moving up closer, and Wade kept the Colt in his hand.

"Where's Manton?" somebody asked in the rear. The horses were moving restlessly, blowing from their exertions.

"Bill's due in from Gray City on that nine o'clock train," another man stated. "Reckon we ought to bring this hombre in till Bill gits around to him."

"Don't try it," Wade said. He listened to the moments of ensuing silence and he knew he had them. They looked down at the dead Birdie Karnes, and they knew Birdie had lost—whatever he had stood to win.

The man standing by Karnes' body said flatly, explaining their inaction, "If you try to leave town after this, mister, we'll round you up with a posse. There ain't a damned place that you can go but we'll get you."

Wade Conroy smiled. "Man I spoke to before asked me to leave. Now you invite me to stay. Reckon I'll stay."

He watched them load Birdie Karnes onto a horse and move away, going down the same alley up which they had come. The men who had been on the Washington Hotel porch came out again. One of them, a short, solidly-built man, crossed the street to where Wade was sitting, still a little undecided as to where he would spend the night.

This man asked, "Was that Birdie Karnes you shot?" His attitude had undergone a subtle change from what it had been earlier.

"That's the name they gave him," Wade told him. He heard John Bradford's side door opening.

"Now," the short man mumbled, "Birdie was Marshal Manton's best friend. You kind o' stuck yore neck in a noose, mister."

Wade didn't say anything. He saw a girl standing in the doorway across the road, watching him. He could not see her clearly, but he was positive it was Ellen Bradford.

"Better ride on," the citizen warned him, "afore Manton hits Bowman."

"I ride when I'm ready," Wade said shortly, his eye on that open door.

He knew he had to cross the street and pay his respects to Ellen. A man owed his former fiance that much, and it had not been her fault that she'd married John Bradford. The report had come from the East that he'd been killed at Antietam. He'd spent eighteen months in a Confederate prison camp, nursing a stomach wound. Ellen had even written to him, a painfully embarrassing letter, telling him that she loved John, and that she was very, very sorry, but happy that he was alive.

Wade dismounted and walked the chestnut across the road. He tied the animal to the hitching rack outside the store and stepped up to the side entrance. She was wearing a shawl over her shoulders, and he could not see her face very clearly, but she was Ellen, tall, dark-haired, grave of manner. He was surprised that she looked so young. The twelve years seemed to have passed over her very lightly, and even today she could have been taken for a girl of nineteen.

He said quietly, "How are you, Ellen?"

He had his hat off then as he came up on the walk, and he held it in his hands, waiting for the first shock of recognition. Again he wondered just why he'd come back; he'd wanted to see his home town again, but there could have been something else.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, sir," the girl said. "I am not Mrs. Bradford."

Wade Conroy nearly dropped his hat. It was the same voice, Ellen's house, the same girl. He remembered, though, that it had been twelve years, and the picture he'd had in his mind's eye would naturally be distorted.

"You—you're not Mrs. Bradford?" Wade gasped. "Ellen Bradford?"

"No." She smiled. "I am Miss Townsend."

This time it held him speechless and he took another step closer. In the shadows her face was a white oval, but it still seemed Ellen's face with the same air to it when she smiled.

"Ellen is in her room," the strange girl informed him. "I've been mistaken for my cousin on several occasions. I am Barbara Townsend."

"Barbara Townsend," Wade mused. He remembered now—Ellen had relatives in Boston. She would be ten years younger than Ellen, and she had been planning to come West for a visit when the war broke out.

"If you're an old friend of Ellen's," Barbara Townsend smiled, "she'll be glad to see you."

"Now—" Wade started to say, but the girl was already running up the stairs. Whatever she had thought of the rioting, it hadn't scared her—he wondered a little uneasily if she had seen the shooting of Birdie Karnes.

When she came down again, Wade was thinking embarrassedly of the striking resemblance between the two cousins. And when she held the door open and motioned him inside, it struck him with a sudden realization that something must be wrong with Ellen.

"Is she ill?" he asked suddenly.

The girl nodded. "She's been in bed for the past two months. John—Mr. Bradford has gone to Gray City for another physician."

CHAPTER TWO

Kill to Live

HE FOLLOWED the girl up the stairs and, pausing at an open doorway, filled it. He saw Ellen lying on a bed across the room—a thinner Ellen. Her eyes seemed larger and her face was flushed. She lost her color when Wade stepped into the room, hat in hand.

"Wade!"

He walked over to the bed and took her hand. It was thin, white, and there was no strength to it.

"I'm sorry to see you this way, Ellen."

"We're glad you came back, Wade," Ellen told him. "You must meet Wade Conroy, Barbara."

"A pleasure," Barbara smiled. "I believe Mr. Conroy had a little trouble with the men from the other side of town."

Ellen nodded. "I saw—from the window. Wade, they've been through here almost every night since John's been away. Who was it, Wade?"

"A man by the name of Birdie Karnes."

Ellen said dully, "He's in with George Teague's crowd. They'll try to kill you, Wade."

"Teague?" Wade repeated. "I figured the head man in this town went by the name of Bill Manton."

"Manton is George Teague's marshal. Teague runs the Crystal Palace on the other side of the tracks. John ran our own sheriff against Manton, but Teague bought out all the votes and defeated us. At the present time John is trying to reorganize politics

and break Teague's power." There was pride in her voice.

Wade didn't say anything. He tried to visualize the quiet, conciliatory John Bradford bucking up against the crowd of toughs and gunmen George Teague could throw against him. Teague would keep applying the presssure until John Bradford cracked—or until Teague gave the word for one of his toughs to slide a knife through Bradford's ribs on a dark night.

He became aware of Barbara Townsend's eyes on him and knew that she was sizing him up. It made him a little uncomfortable and he glanced out of the window, down the street toward the Washington Hotel. A group of men were still on the porch talking earnestly, looking toward the Bradford store.

"Be careful," Barbara said suddenly. "I'm sure Ellen would feel responsible if anything happened to you. You were protecting her house."

"I'll never walk into trouble that I can't handle," Wade said without emotion.

He made his good nights and walked toward the Washington Hotel. He'd expected to feel depressed after seeing Ellen again, but strangely enough he felt very calm. It was as if a great weight had been taken from his shoulders, and he walked now with a lighter

step. He knew that he should have made this visit years ago instead of harboring her bitter image in his heart. He would have gotten over it much more easily.

The group on the porch opened to let him through, and he heard a man call out his name. He stopped to shake hands with a man he'd known slightly years before.

"Fred Hawkins, remember? I run the barber shop up the street."

Word of his homecoming had spread, but he didn't want to discuss it, and went into the lobby and registered for a room. Hawkins, a tall, thin man with a stoop, followed him.

"I saw you shoot Birdie Karnes," he said. "Kind of a bad business, Wade." He rubbed his long hands—then, "You figure on stayin' in Bowman?"

"Tonight anyway," Wade said. He had no plans as yet, but he remembered the words of Marshal Manton's toughs. They'd promised to bring him back if he attempted to ride away. He knew what he had to do tonight. Out on the plains, fighting the Sioux, it was the man who struck first who lived.

"Karnes busted my windows three times," Hawkins was saying. "If you stay long enough to need a shave, haircut, or bath, Wade, it'll be free."

WADE signed the register and turned around, grinning slightly. He'd been riding for two weeks and needed all these things now.

"You closed, Fred?" he asked.

"I'm open now—come on over."

Wade sat in the chair while Hawkins cut his hair and heated water for the tin bathtub in the back. He got the history of the town for the twelve years he'd been away, something he'd wanted.

"Everybody figured we needed the trail trade in the beginning," the barber explained. "That was before George Teague moved in here with his crowd. The railroad comin' to Bowman was a big thing, but every storekeeper on the north side o' the tracks regrets it now. We asked for somethin' we couldn't handle. Teague had our sheriff driven out and put Bill Manton in as marshal. He's tough, but on the wrong side."

"What about John Bradford?"

The barber shrugged. "Ben Tompkins—he's the coroner—has John already fitted for a coffin."

"As bad as that?" Wade observed thoughtfully.

"George Teague don't like anybody buckin' him," Hawkins said, "an' John has been doin' that." He paused and went on angrily. "All of us know we don't need the trail trade any more. These crazy punchers come in here an' spend a lot o' money—which goes into Teague's pockets anyway. They scare the honest citizens o' Bowman out o' their wits by ridin' through here at Teague's invitation."

"How will you boys get along?" Wade wanted to know.

"Nester trade," Hawkins said emphatically. "This is turnin' into farm country, although the cattlemen will be here fer a good many years. The nesters are movin' out here in droves every year, an' they need supplies. They need a town like Bowman to keep 'em alive."

"Teague wouldn't have any use for nesters," Wade said.

Hawkins grinned as he cut away locks of Wade's black hair. "They ain't free spenders, Wade," he said, "an' they want somethin' fer their money. Teague gives out aches for the heads I shave—but things have been goin' from bad to worse the past six months, an' if it keeps up, an' Teague comes across the tracks we're all finished."

Wade leaned back in the chair. The shade across Hawkins' broken window was drawn nearly all the way, but he could still see through it. The train from Gray City was already in at the station, and he could hear the engine puffing idly.

A heavy red curtain was drawn across the front of the little room in which Fred Hawkins kept his two tin bathtubs. Wade went behind it and started to undress, putting the big Navy Colt on a chair within easy reach.

Hawkins said, "I'll keep an eye peeled, outside," and left.

The water was hot and he stepped into it gingerly. Through a crinkle in the curtains he saw the barber take up a position near a dimmed window.

Grinning, Wade lathered himself and soaked in the hot water. Some of the weariness left his body. There was a clock on a shelf across the room, its hands pointing to ten. The night was still young, and he had a feeling that all the things that would happen before sunrise had not yet begun.

At quarter past ten Fred Hawkins poked his head worriedly through the curtain. "Slade O'Mara's outside—he's Manton's chief deputy."

Wade reached for a towel and stood up quickly, drying his hands.

"Let him in if he wants to see me," he said.

Hawkins grinned wryly. "Ain't no keepin' Slade out if he wants to go in some place. Manton must o' sent him over first to see how tough you are, Conroy."

"A careful man lives longer—at least a little longer," Wade observed.

He stepped out of the tub when he heard someone at the door. Hawkins went through the red curtain, pulling it shut as he went

out. Wade looked around the little room carefully. There was no time to get dressed. A small window opened up onto a back alley, and a mop stood near this window.

Grabbing up the mop and the Navy Colt, Wade stepped over to the curtain, standing against the wall. He heard gruff voices outside and reached over to slap at the water with the mop. He hummed a tune—listening.

Beyond the curtain he could hear the door close softly. The voices had stopped. He waited by the wall as a big hand gripped the edge of the curtain. The fingers were short, stubby, and the back of the hand was covered with black hair.

Then the red curtain was torn open and a thick-set man plunged through, gun in hand. Wade Conroy caught a glimpse of black jowls, and a thick neck. He slashed down with the barrel of the Navy, and heard O'Mara grunt as the steel collided with his skull.

The deputy spun around, bleary blue eyes growing vacant. He sat down in a heap on the wet floor, and Wade calmly kicked the gun from his hand, then walked around to pick it up. It was a Smith & Wesson .44.

Only half-conscious, O'Mara was mumbling something as he rocked on the floor. Fred Hawkins poked his head into the room, took a deep breath.

"By hell!"

Wade picked up a towel and started to dry himself. He placed his own weapon and O'Mara's on the chair nearby, and he watched the deputy with interest while he dressed. He saw the light of reason come into O'Mara's eyes as he was pulling on his boots.

O'Mara shook his big head several times. His hat had fallen off when he went down, and his hair was black and curly. He had a blunt, hard face which now wore a look of injury.

"How do you feel?" Wade asked him.

O'Mara stared around the room several times, trying to acclimatize himself. When he finally located Wade, the bleary eyes narrowed. He looked at the two guns on the chair, dropped his right hand to the empty holster at his side, and then started to shake his head.

"All right, my friend," he said.

"You want to see me?" Wade asked him innocently.

O'Mara nodded. "In a pine box, ridin' up the hill, with Ben Tompkins drivin' the wagon."

"Tell that to Manton—and that I'd like to see him," Wade said. He had a feeling of confidence—a sense that tonight everything he did would go all right.

O'Mara picked up his hat, looked at his gun and then, meeting Wade's eyes, walked toward the curtain.

"You can pick this up tomorrow," Wade told him. He smiled coldly and stepped a few feet away from the chair, putting as much distance between it and himself as between himself and O'Mara. "Unless you'd like to pick it up now."

The deputy paused.

"Tomorrow will do," he said gruffly and went out.

WADE could hear his horse moving down the street a few moments later. Fred Hawkins came in and sat down on the edge of the tub, his face wreathed in a broad grin.

"What now?"

Wade Conroy stood in front of the mirror, combing his hair. He strapped on the gun-belt and reached for his black sombrero.

"The Crystal Palace," he said quietly.

Hawkins nearly fell into the tub.

"All in one night!" he gasped. "Why, damn it, Wade—nobody even knows about O'Mara yet!"

"Then let's spread the word," Wade said and walked through the curtain.

He rode down the same alley from which Birdie Karnes had ridden to his death two hours earlier; then across the railroad tracks and down another side street. The train still stood on the siding and ahead several pianos and banjos tinkled. A drunk was singing lustily, competing hoarsely with the barkers in front of each gambling house. A haze hung over the south side of Bowman and the air seemed hotter here.

He cut into the main street, blinking into the bright lights. Several punchers careened wildly down the center of the street, shouting drunkenly, one horse piling up close to Wade's chestnut. He didn't give ground and heard the puncher curse at him, but keep going.

He spotted the Crystal Palace halfway down the street, a string of lanterns strung around its porch. The Palace was two stories high, the largest building in Bowman, dwarfing even John Bradford's store. Every foot of space at the long hitch-rack outside the Palace was filled. Groups of punchers reeled up and down the walks, all of them red of face, some of them wild-eyed. A man with a wad of bills in his right hand stumbled out of one saloon, staggered across the road, moving miraculously around a pitching horse, and entered another saloon.

A barker in checkered suit and derby spotted Wade riding down the right side of the street. He stood at the edge of the walk and called loudly, "This way, friend. Prettiest girls and highest stakes in Bowman. Walk right in and take your pick."

Wade smiled at him and kept going. He'd been in fast towns before, but nothing re-

motely approximating this. Looking over the top of the batwing doors of one of the houses, he could see trail riders whirling painted women around the dance floor. Drunks hung over the bar. Every card table was filled.

Still he was not prepared for the spectacle in the Crystal Palace. Here the clink of glasses was constant, and the low murmur of the keno men calling the numbers. A roulette wheel whirred upstairs on the second floor, and a drunk near the door was mumbling over and over again, "This is my night."

Peering through the haze of tobacco smoke, he saw, at the far end of the big room, a small stage with its curtain drawn. The bar was at least eighty feet long, of mahogany, backed with expensive mirrors. Eight white-clad bartenders hustled behind its smooth wood, pushing drinks right and left with amazing speed. Wade recognized one of the men who had been with Karnes standing at the bar. He looked for O'Mara, but didn't see him.

There was a stairway with a Brussels carpet of blue leading up to the second floor. A small man in a black frock coat and shoestring tie, stood to the right of the stairway. He was hatless, his hair thin and blond. He had a small blond mustache, and a pair of the coldest blue eyes Wade had ever seen. His features were delicate as a doll's—the mouth small, thin-lipped, the nose perfectly proportioned.

Wade felt the blue eyes go over him, pass by, and then come back again for another look—and knew without being told that George Teague, owner of the Crystal Palace, was sizing him up.

Teague nodded to men moving up and down the stairs. He spoke briefly to a bouncer in a checkered coat and then moved toward the bar. Wade watched him disappear a few moments later through a door with a blue curtain in front of it.

After waiting another five minutes, Wade spotted an opening at the bar and took it. He had one drink and then George Teague came out again. Teague moved through the crowd unhesitatingly and stopped beside Wade. He had very little color in his face.

Teague ordered a drink and sipped it with relish. He stepped away from the bar then and lighted a cigar, observing Wade casually through the cloud of blue smoke.

"Stranger in town?"

Wade nodded. "This part of it," he said.

George Teague smiled, revealing a row of white teeth, small, well-matched. "A man has to know this part to stay in Bowman."

He stepped back and Wade turned with him, getting his back to the bar. He leaned against it with both elbows. The posture left him a view of the staircase—it was almost insolently easy, but Teague's eyes narrowed when he noted how close to his dangling hand it brought the heavy grip of the Navy.

Wade spoke before Teague could take the play again. "They tell me you'd be interested, so I came over to let you know. Birdie Karnes drew a gun on me. I had to shoot him."

Teague smiled. "Glad you admit it, my friend," he said. "That's all I wanted to know."

WADE CONROY felt the muzzle of a six-gun jammed into the small of his back. A man from the other side of the bar said softly, "Drifter, I wouldn't want to blow you across this room."

Very carefully, Wade considered his chances and found them poor. The man with the soft voice undoubtedly was Bill Manton. A few people were taking notice now, and Wade heard the hum of voices. George Teague stepped away, still puffing on the cigar, his small white hands shoved in his vest pockets, mild curiosity written on his face.

Wade felt the gun muzzle shoved a trifle harder into his back. The soft voice said, "Slip out o' that gunbelt."

Wade saw O'Mara coming down the stairs, face red, triumph written in his bleary eyes. O'Mara already had his six-gun out, and was anxious to use it.

Shrugging, Wade unbuckled the gunbelt and let it fall. O'Mara scooped it up and jammed his own weapon into Wade's stomach.

Wade heard a man leap lightly over the bar. He turned and looked into Bill Manton's placid face. The marshal was a tall man, willowy, narrow in the shoulders. He wore an expensive, soft gray sombrero, fawn-colored coat, and highly-embossed boots. He had a narrow face and silky, honey-brown hair, worn low at the neck. A man careful in his dress and careful in his hate. His eyes were small, blue-green, and very dangerous.

"So you killed Birdie Karnes," Manton murmured. "Shot him down like a dog in the street."

Wade looked at him, smiled, but didn't say anything. After a moment's silence he drawled, "Where I come from, marshal, a man doesn't crawl up on a chap. He comes to him in front."

"That might be," Manton said easily, "but it all serves the same purpose. We'll take a little walk to the jail house."

Three other men fell in step with O'Mara and Manton, outside, and walked down the street silently. They had, Wade guessed, been stationed on the porch, and had been watching him through the door, covering him every moment.

"You take pretty good care of yourself, marshal," Wade told him grimly. "You should live a long time."

"I'm fixing to," Bill Manton said pleasantly.

They turned down a side street, pulling up outside a one story brick building. Manton opened the door with a key, and one of the men lighted a lamp in the office.

"Take him in the back," Manton said quietly, nodding down a narrow corridor.

O'Mara pushed Wade down this passage and shoved him into one of the cells. He stood there, looking into the cell, grinning a little, while the other three men filed in past him. Manton came in last, closing the cell door behind him, and leaning his back against it.

"So you shot Birdie Karnes," Manton said softly.

Wade stood in the center of the little room, his hands on his hips, feet braced. Again he felt that tingling sensation running up and down his back. He looked at O'Mara with the gun in his hand. Another of the deputies had a gun out, and it was trained on Wade's stomach.

Manton looked at one of the men on Wade's left. "Get him, Sam."

Sam, a stout man in his shirt-sleeves and with powerful forearms moved and Wade hit him in the mouth with his right. Sam went down to his knees and crouched there, his hands to his mouth, moaning a little. Wade's boot crashed him against the far wall, near where Manton was standing.

The three of them came in at once then, O'Mara swinging the barrel of his six-gun. Wade went under the gun and hit O'Mara in the belly, doubling him. The other two smashed him up against the wall, and from there he had to give and take as he could. He swung at their faces, landing and missing, cutting his knuckles once on somebody's teeth.

O'Mara got up again, and then Sam. The four of them hammered Wade to his knees, slashing at his face, cutting him around the mouth and eyes. They tried to pinion his arms, but he broke away, lashing out wildly with his fists, the blood from a cut over his right eye nearly blinding him.

O'Mara's gun-barrel against his right temple finally sent him down. The strength left his body. They hoisted him to his feet, held him that way, as he shook his head, trying to clear his vision. He'd made no sounds since the fight started.

Bill Manton stepped forward, braced himself, and swung from the heels, hitting Wade squarely in the mouth. He felt the pain as he lurched back toward the wall. They lifted him again, and Manton took another swing while they held Wade, this time aiming for the stomach.

Wade didn't have time to brace himself, and the punch took all the wind out of him. He had no strength in his legs, and he hung there, gasping for breath, while Manton hit him freely in the face with both fists, cutting him, knocking his head from side to side.

He didn't know when he lost consciousness All he could see was Manton's face in front of him, twisted with hatred, lips tight, pounding into him the knowledge that he would kill Marshal Manton at the first opportunity.

CHAPTER THREE

Live to Kill

THERE was no more pain and the room seemed to be getting darker, even though there was a lamp hanging in the corridor, providing sufficient light. He knew after a while that he was lying on the cot in the cell, and that he was alone. He had no idea of the time. He could see the oil lamp flickering in the overhead bracket outside the door and hear the low murmur of voices from the jail office.

His hand felt his face and found blood; his cuts were untended. Both eyes were swollen and half-closed. His mouth was blown up to twice its normal size. There was a hell of pain in his stomach and his ribs. He was positive they'd kicked him when he finally went to the floor.

Footsteps sounded on the stone corridor, and then a man stood outside the door, grining in at him. It was Slade O'Mara.

"Kind o' calmed down, ain't you?"

Wade didn't say anything. He put O'Mara down as another he would have to kill. He realized there would be no rest in the world for him while Manton and O'Mara lived.

O'Mara looked at him uncomfortably for a few moments when he refused to answer and then walked away. Wade got up stiffly and made the rounds of the tiny cell. There was one window, high up in the wall, heavily barred. The cell door was of one inch iron bars; the walls were of stone, as was the floor, making it utterly impossible to break out. If help came, it would have to come from the outside.

He sat down again on the couch and went over the situation calmly. Manton and Teague would undoubtedly have him brought up on a murder charge. They could arrange for a conviction easily enough—he had few friends left in Bowman. Aside from John Bradford and Fred Hawkins there weren't more than a dozen people who even remembered him—and George Teague had the town half frightened out of its collective wits.

In the morning he heard a familiar voice speaking heatedly with someone in the office—John Bradford. It was evident the storekeeper was insisting on his right to visit the prisoner and O'Mara, on guard, was refusing him the privilege. He heard John Bradford go away a few minutes later, threatening to go to law in the matter.

O'Mara came in with coffee and doughnuts, shoving them under the door, and insisting first that Wade get back against the wall. The deputy, Wade could see, was jumpy.

Wade had to wait till the coffee cooled down so he could get it past his battered lips. O'Mara didn't offer to bring in water so that he could wash the caked blood from his face. Alone again, Wade listened to the sounds from the other end of the building, but heard little. He sensed, though, from O'Mara's nervous restlessness, that the deputy had developed a terrible fear of him.

During the remainder of the morning, Wade sat on his cot and tried desperately to plan a way to freedom—for using such friends as he had. He made another survey of the cell, but the building was quite new, and it had been well made. Finally he had the lone hope that the deputy who would replace O'Mara would be a little more careless—less fearful—but it was only a hope.

O'Mara was still in charge of the jailhouse when Wade heard the sudden commotion in the office. This time a woman was speaking angrily above O'Mara's protests. The voice was strangely familiar. Next there came O'Mara's sudden cry of pain, and then light footsteps on the stone floor.

He went up to the bars and waited there. Barbara Townsend was approaching with a tray full of food. When she saw him, she let out a short cry and came to the bars.

"You'll have to get the hell out of here, lady."

O'Mara was coming up, limping a little, his face red. Wade guessed the girl had kicked or hit him in the shins and then run past him. Then she had grasped Wade's right hand, and he felt something small and cold, metallic, placed there.

With the girl shielding him near the bars, Wade slipped the little object inside his shirt. Then O'Mara had her by the shoulders and forcibly pulled her away.

"I insist," Barbara snapped, "that you give him the food I brought."

O'Mara picked up the tray and took the napkin from it, his eyes narrowing. Wade watched him poking around in the plate of beans and bacon, even lifting up the slices of bread to make sure no weapon or note of any kind was concealed. He even took away the knife and the fork Barbara Townsend had provided, but left a spoon on the tray before sliding it in under the door.

"It'll be a long day," the deputy grinned, "when you catch me sleepin'."

"I'm bringing a basin of water and towels," Barbara said tersely, "so that he can wash himself. You men should be ashamed of yourselves." She walked away with the protesting O'Mara.

The deputy himself came back with the basin, the girl following him. He slid it under the door while Wade sat on the cot eating the food.

When O'Mara finally ejected the girl and came back to the cell, Wade was washing his face with the towel. O'Mara stood outside the door, watching him.

"So you're a friend o' the Bradfords?" the deputy growled. "That'll help you—in hell!"

Wade finished and pushed the pan of water toward the door. He stood by the little window then and said slowly, "You'll never see tomorrow morning, O'Mara. Remember that."

He saw some of the color leave the deputy's face, but O'Mara growled, "Hell with you!"

When the man left, Wade stood with his back toward the cell door and took the little

object from his shirt. It was a tiny vest pocket Remington—small enough to be concealed in the palm of his hand—a five shot Elliot model, good only at close range. Carefully he slid the weapon back inside his shirt.

He didn't know whether John Bradford or Barbara Townsend had thought up the idea, but Bradford would know how serious the situation was if he wanted him to make a break. The girl's close anxiety was a pleasant—almost a heady—memory, but he reminded himself that it had been for a purpose—to fool O'Mara.

O'MARA didn't come back the remainder of the afternoon. Near six o'clock he came down the corridor with a tray full of food. Wade sat on the cot and watched him set it down. When the deputy turned around, Wade was at the cell door in one long stride.

He said quietly, "O'Mara."

When the deputy turned around he looked into the small muzzle of the Remington. The distance was about six feet, and Wade had the gun trained on O'Mara's forehead, holding it very steady. He saw O'Mara's face turn the color of dirty clay.

"Unbuckle that gunbelt," Wade told him tersely. "These things are set on hair springs, friend."

O'Mara stared at the little gun as if hypnotized. He started to put his hands over his head. His mouth was open and his lower lip hung down.

"The gunbelt," Wade prodded him. "Drop it."

O'Mara fumbled with the gunbelt and it fell to the floor.

"Kick it over," Wade told him.

The gun was the Smith & Wesson .44 he'd taken from O'Mara the previous night in the barber shop. Wade slipped the Remington back inside his shirt as he picked it up.

"Now the key," Wade said flatly. He could see that O'Mara was remembering his threat earlier in the day. Those words were hammering through the man's mind.

"You wouldn't shoot down an unarmed man," the deputy muttered.

"Open this damned door," Wade said savagely.

O'Mara came over with the key and unlocked the door. He stood aside as Wade stepped out.

"Inside," Wade told him. He could see through the cell window that it was getting dark outside. When O'Mara walked past him, Wade rapped the gun barrel against his head, knocking him to the floor. He ran out to the office then and found a pair of manacles. Coming back with these he chained O'Mara's hands behind his back and then worked a gag into his mouth. The deputy was almost unconscious.

When the little men get tough, they get tougher than the toughs.

Locking the door behind the man, Wade buckled the gunbelt around his own waist and ran down the corridor. He slipped out into a side street without being seen, and hurried up toward the railroad tracks. Instead of crossing them, he circled behind the Crystal Palace. They were lighting the huge glass chandeliers which hung from the ceiling. All along the main street, lights were going on and trail riders were coming in from their herds bedded down a few miles out of town.

Wade strolled up toward the corner, his hat well down over his eyes. He took up a position in a doorway directly opposite the entrance to the Crystal Palace. Through a window he could see a portion of the blue-carpeted staircase and, at seven o'clock, Bill Manton coming downstairs. A half hour later Manton stepped through the batwing doors and paused to chat with two men standing on the porch. There was a bulge under Manton's coat indicating that he was heeled.

Wade pushed himself away from the building and stepped out into the center of the street, coming into the light cast by the Crystal Palace chandeliers. He stopped here, a distance of twenty-five feet from the porch, and called softly:

"All right, Manton."

Bill Manton had been half-facing him. The marshal turned around completely now, a cigar in his right hand. His coat swung open, and Wade saw the six-gun in the holster. Wade stood in the street, hands at his side, a grim smile on his face.

"You know me, Manton," he said quietly, and then he added to the men with Manton, "Reckon you boys better clear out."

Manton hadn't made a move since he'd turned and Wade could almost feel the man's brain working. Manton knew why he'd come—but he wasn't anxious for a shootout at this time.

The two men hastily ducked through the batwing doors, and Manton raised the cigar to his lips again. He was stalling for time, Wade thought, hoping some of his deputies would turn up to give him the edge.

"Go for your gun," Wade said flatly, "if you don't want to be shot down like a dog."

Manton smiled at him, flipped the cigar into the gutter, and then made a leap for the doors two yards away. Wade saw his right hand reaching for the gun as he went through the door and fired one fast shot at the marshal, the slug going into the door post.

He took one step forward, ready to follow Manton into the gambling house when a gun cracked from a side window. Wade felt the breath of the bullet as it caressed his right cheek. He fired hastily, breaking the glass, and then darted back around the corner. Manton opened up from the protection of the building.

A man raced out one of the side doors, crossed the gutter, and plunged into another building across the way. He opened fire from the doorway here, and Wade had to move. He made the next corner. Several punchers coming out of a saloon stared at him as he sprinted past them, gun in hand.

He went up another alley, stumbling through the refuse-strewn passageway, and emerged near the railroad line. A train whistle was blowing up near the stockyards as he raced across the track. He told himself, swearing, that he'd have to go back later and stalk Manton the way a hunter stalked his prey. He'd have to hide and bide his time, but he knew that he would never leave Bowman until Manton was dead.

HE WAS moving past Fred Hawkins' barber shop when the barber came out, gripping a big Sharps' rifle in his hand. Hawkins had been heading up the street to John Bradford's store. He stopped and stared at Wade curiously.

He said, "Reckon you're out just in time, Wade."

"What's happened?" Wade wanted to know.

"Tonight," Hawkins growled, "is the night."

Wade's eyes widened. "You boys going across the tracks?" he asked.

"Hell," Hawkins said. "Teague's comin' across here, an' we're plannin' to give him a welcome."

Wade could see other men hurrying toward Bradford's store in the darkness.

"What brought it on?" he asked the barber.

Hawkins sniffed. "Teague discovered John's been tryin' to bring a United States marshal in here. He's plannin' to burn John out—or so we heard. You been in the army, Wade. You're the man to tell us how to fight."

In the back of John Bradford's store, Wade found thirty-five armed men, sitting around on boxes and barrels, holding a conference of war. John Bradford himself came forward to shake Wade's hand. The storekeeper had a few streaks of gray in his black hair, even though he was still a comparatively young man. He'd taken on weight since Wade had seen him last, and he was wearing spectacles which gave him an even more placid appearance.

"Glad to see you, Wade," he said quietly.

"Thanks for getting me out," Wade told him. "Reckon I'd have rotted there."

"Thank Barbara," Bradford smiled. "It was her idea. She's been worrying herself sick that you didn't make it."

Fred Hawkins was rubbing his hands in a satisfied manner, and looking around the room.

"Reckon a man kin make Bill Manton run should be on our side, boys," he said.

John Bradford moistened his lips. He had a gun on his hip which looked strangely out of place. "Take over for me," Bradford asked him. "I don't know where to begin."

Wade nodded. He walked to the front of the store with John Bradford and looked out into the street.

"About Ellen," Bradford said, "we're all sorry for you, Wade. You know it was—"

"Forget it," Wade told him and meant it. He was surprised at himself. He had a long look at the street and then he came back. "They'll hit here first," he said. "We'll have to be ready for them."

In the back room he divided the group into three squads, placing Bradford, Hawkins, and a man named McDaniels in charge of them.

"Everybody armed?" he asked suddenly.

He noticed several double-barreled shotguns in the crowd and grinned. There were a number of Sharps' rifles and some Spencers; the others all carried six-guns. He gave final instructions and placed his men.

When they were gone, he sat down on a barrel in the front part of the store. He could hear a clock ticking somewhere, and then a light step on the staircase from the second floor. He stood up when Barbara Townsend came through the side door. She was wearing a plain brown dress with a pin at the neck.

"I'm glad you got out, Mr. Conroy."

"Thanks to you," Wade told her. "I'd have been in for a long time."

"When you shot Birdie Karnes, you put some fight into this town. They need you still."

She looked at him for some time, her face very serious; then he heard horses coming into the main street and said quietly, "Better go up and keep low."

When she had gone he went to the door. He could see them filing out of the alley, coming up from the south side of the tracks. He counted eighteen, and was surprised that there were not more. Teague should have had twice that number. They didn't make any noise until they were out of the alley.

Then they rushed down the street, opening fire with six-guns, howling drunkenly. The man at the head of the column was heavy in the shoulders. Wade could see his flat-crowned sombrero outlined against the light of the moon.

The cavalcade pulled up in front of Bradford's store and a man roared.

"Bradford—come out." It was O'Mara, the deputy.

Wade grasped the door knob and stepped out quickly. He was still in the shadows, and O'Mara wasn't sure who it was.

"You want me, friend?" Wade asked softly.

HE SAW O'Mara stiffen in the saddle. The other riders were milling around in the street, some of them still shooting into the air. Wade gave the deputy plenty of time to go for his gun, but he still got off the first shot. O'Mara's right hand tore downward. The muzzle of his six-gun was coming into view when Wade shot him through the chest.

There was a moment of stunned silence as O'Mara slowly tumbled from his horse, hat falling from his head. Gun in hand, Wade called sharply, "All right, boys."

Rifle barrels suddenly stuck out from the roof of the building opposite the Bradford store. A half dozen men came out of an alley twenty yards up the street, six-guns trained on the group in the street. Other men raised windows and leaned out, getting their sights on the toughs.

"Lay down the guns," Wade snapped.

He wasn't prepared for the next move. Another party of horsemen suddenly boiled out of a side street from the opposite direction and tore down toward them, firing as they came.

Wade watched one of the riders in front of him yank his gun out and raise it for a shot. He got the man in the right shoulder, knocking him from the saddle, and dived back inside, as other guns opened up on him. He could hear the men on the roof shooting and saw several saddles emptied.

The new party of toughs pulled up abruptly,

surprised at this sudden show of resistance.

"Give 'em hell," Fred Hawkins yelled. "They're askin' for it."

Wade got out the side door into the alley flanking the store. He fired at the leader of the second party, a big man riding a black horse. The horse went down, spilling the rider badly. John Bradford, leading eight men, charged out of the stable entrance across the way, putting a ring of fire around the toughs in the center of the street.

Wade saw a half dozen men throw up their hands, while others dug spurs into their mounts to break through the circle. A shotgun boomed, and two men in the second group screamed as the leaden pellets tore into them. The others pulled up, broke, and then fled in the direction they had come.

"After 'em!" the barber roared. "Let's go across the tracks!"

Wade Conroy grinned.

The toughs who had given up were herded into the back of Bradford's store. "We'll give them our own trial tomorrow," John Bradford was saying excitedly.

"We'll tear down the Crystal Palace," Hawkins yelled. "They come over to burn us out."

Three men were left to guard the eight prisoners, and the others rushed out again. Wade caught up a horse in the street and rode furiously down the alley and across the tracks.

A man was yelling behind him, "Bring axes—everybody bring axes!"

Wade saw the crowds in the street. Bartenders had come out to the curb when the firing broke out on the other side of the tracks. Even the barkers were silent now as the men from the north side of the tracks charged over the boundary line.

Outside the Crystal Palace, Wade slid out of the saddle. He went up the wooden steps two at a time and broke through the batwing doors. Only a few men were at the bar, and they skipped out the back door when they heard the crowd coming up.

"Where's Bill Manton?" Wade demanded of the nearest bartender. He saw the man's eyes flicker upward, and he whirled around to see the marshal standing at the top of the stairs, a six-gun braced against his side, a small grin on his face.

Wade fell away from the bar just as Manton's gun roared. He heard the slug tear through the mahogany of the bar, and he got off his first shot, missing his man completely.

Manton disappeared and Wade scrambled to his feet. He went up the stairs in four big strides, catching Manton completely by surprise. He knew the marshal wouldn't be expecting him to make a direct charge.

Manton was calling to George Teague on the other side of the room. A roulette wheel stood in the center, but it was deserted. A huge glass chandelier hung over this center table. There were smaller card tables scattered along each wall, but none of them were occupied. A half dozen men who had been in the room were ducking into cloak closets.

The marshal stood on the other side of the roulette wheel, half facing Wade. He caught a brief glimpse of his man, and tried to duck beneath the table, at the same time bringing his gun up for a shot.

Wade's slug caught him between the eyes as he went down. The gun slid from his limp hands and fell to the floor. Wade spun around on Teague, who was running for one of the small balconies overlooking the stage below.

The little man crouched down in the balcony, half-hidden behind the seats. His first shot staggered Wade as it caught him in the left shoulder. He stayed on his feet and kept going, firing through the opening to the balcony. He didn't know whether his first shot went home, and he pressed down on the hammer again, hearing it click on an empty cylinder.

George Teague stood up, his right hand over his heart. He tried to bring his gun into position, but couldn't seem to get it up. There was a peculiar expression on his waxen face, an expression of mingled surprise and wonder, and then very suddenly he fell backward, tearing through the light lattice work which screened the balcony from the floor below. Wade heard his body hit the floor, thirty feet below, with a sickening thud.

John Bradford helped him back to the store an hour later. They left behind them the Crystal Palace, crackling flames, a red glow showing through the windows.

"I never figured they'd burn it down," Wade said.

Bradford shook his head. "When the little men get riled," he observed, "they're tougher than the toughs. We'll clean out this side of the tracks as soon as we get our own law officer out on the street."

"When will that be?" Wade asked him.

Bradford grinned. "As soon as we can patch up that shoulder," he said softly. "How about it?"

They were approaching the railroad tracks, and Wade could see someone standing on the other side, looking at them anxiously. She started to run forward when she saw John Bradford half supporting Wade.

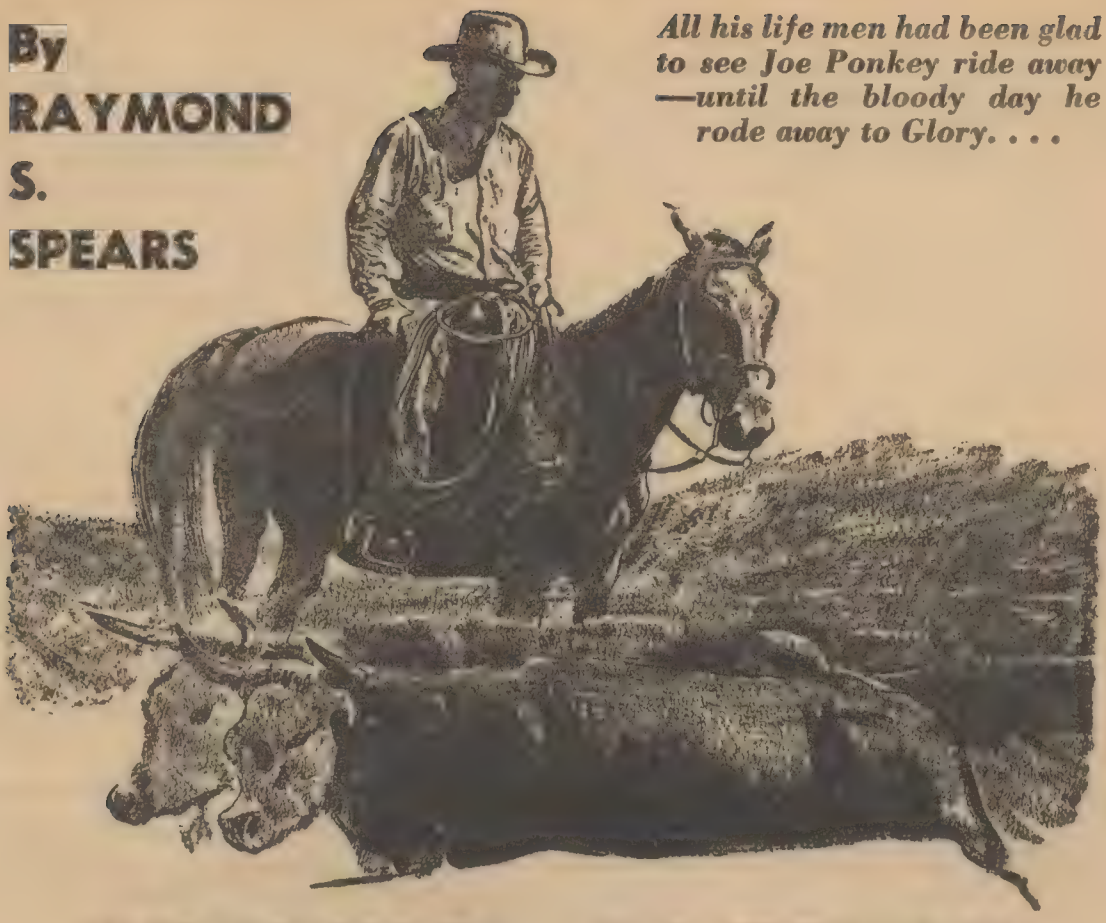
"Now," Wade said thoughtfully, "I've always liked this town, John, and I'll be needing a job."

John Bradford chuckled. "That the only reason, Wade?" he asked. He was watching Barbara Townsend also.

"It'll do," Wade Conroy said, "till I think up a better."

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

All his life men had been glad to see Joe Ponkey ride away —until the bloody day he rode away to Glory. . . .



ORNERY COWBOY

II

A BOY baby was born in a shack on Snake river, just below Jackson's Hole. His father and mother were homesteaders, but Short Ponkey spent most of his time trying to catch coyotes, wolves and bears who knew more than he did. At its best the homestead could never have supported a family on stock or crops. Nevertheless, the baby, called Joe Ponkey, grew up along the river bottoms and up the rough slopes of the neighboring mountain ranges. He learned to ride on calves, but if there had been sheep around he would have become a sheepherder. He just managed to become a cowboy. The V-connected outfit hired him when he was ten years old, and he held a small herd of cows over in the Hoback Basin, keeping them from straying. This was all the education he had tending cows.

Joe was a homely kid, with thick lips, an under-slung chin and a sloping forehead. He learned cows. He'd ride around and among a band of cattle, until he knew them all by sight, cows, calves, steers, heifers. He knew dozens, scores, hundreds of head by sight. He gave names to the ones that were distinctive. He shook his head, when he saw a calf galumphing around like a lamb, gamboling. Those lively calves grew up hard to manage. Sometimes a heifer or steer went bad. Joe knew the symptoms. He could tell if a steer wasn't putting on weight, and he worried about a cow if she wasn't taking care of her calf right.

Joe rode for ranches when his father and mother were starved out of their homestead. The government never ought to have let a man homestead those lands where even a mile

square wouldn't give a family a living by growing stock or raising crops. After spending fourteen years of their lives on that place, eking out with game meat, furs, and wild hides, Mr. and Mrs. Ponkey vanished from that part of Wyoming. They had lost track of Joe. Somebody said he'd gone down to the Union Pacific with a trail herd of beef and just hadn't come back. Joe had taken up with some men who were picking up horses to run through Trail Creek Pass into Idaho, for selling.

Joe's split on the divvy surprised him. Come to find out, he'd been riding with horse thieves.

I ain't no thief! Joe told himself, and, frightened, headed east clear over the Big Horn Mountains, where he got a job on Senator Haydee's ranch. Brutt Cole, the senator's manager just happened to need a rider like Joe, somebody to run small bunches of special cows that needed looking after. Joe could take care of two hundred head. He was real good at attending Hereford bulls, brought in to breed up the quality of the herds. Joe had been known to ride out with cows in a valley pasture for a whole month, never seeing anyone, and for that matter never wanting to see any one.

Other riders couldn't make Joe Ponkey out. Joe didn't talk enough to become eloquent. He never cared for liquor. Only when he wanted boots or a new saddle, or some hard candy did he draw his pay. When he drew his time from the Haydee outfit, Cole handed him eleven hundred dollars cash—gold coins.

"Dog-gone!" Joe blinked. "Is that all for me?"

Joe wore the gold around his waist in a money belt made of horsehide. The weight and jiggling bothered him. He had thirty or forty pounds of gold when he was near thirty years of age. When he changed the place where he hung up his hat, he would go out into the near hills or mountains and pick up his cache, swing the money on a packhorse and ride on his way to some other job out yonder. Even money never got Joe a pal or a friend.

He worked over Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and down into Colorado. He didn't like Colorado much—too many sheep. Yet from the proud eminence of riding herd to cows he felt as if he would like to try tending sheep, some time. Sheep grazed away up high on the mountainsides. Joe had gone over high passes, and always he had stopped to gaze at the valleys behind and ahead of him.

If a man looked a thousand years he'd never see all they is to see! he reflected. *Sheep climb higher'n cows—a herder ought-a see moren' a cowboy. . . .* This was about the limit of Joe Ponkey's thinking.

HIS money was a nuisance, all that load of gold. The word was around that Joe had saddle pokes full of yellow coin. A bad, mean element watched Joe, off and on, trying to catch him when he was moving his hoard into new country. Somehow, Joe never let anyone know when he was changing base, going to learn a new pasture, different grass, a range that he'd heard had interesting peculiarities. As a boy he got to know coyotes and gray wolves, tricky, mean, sure-bright scoundrels! His own furtive, unpredictable ways came from watching the raiders of the ranges. If a killer-wolf tried to raid cows for which Joe was responsible, it was a sorry day for the rogue. Joe had found a revolver when he was a small boy. He could shoot it with either hand, and he carried a carbine in his saddle boot, ready for business.

Joe Ponkey didn't tie in with any one. He never had a pal. He was an odd number, the queer Dick, wherever he joined an outfit. He saved his money because his personal wants were few and rare. He heard the boys talking about money—if they only had a lot of money, so they could buy a ranch, or a store or have one dandy spree all the way from San Francisco to Boston or New York! Thus money came to mean quite a lot to Joe Ponkey. He held on to his. He didn't know what he wanted to do with it, except hide it out, cache it where no one could find it but himself.

Joe Ponkey was paid top-hand wages. If he wasn't he moved on. Yet he was an exasperation, dull, stupid, no 'count outside of his cow *sabe*. He wolfed his grub noisily at the kitchen table. His eyes stared with vacant lack of interest, giving his mates the woollies and making them throw wet socks or boots or pieces of stove wood at him. He'd duck like a badger or flop like a prairie dog, snapping his jaws shut with a queer, audible click.

"What the devil you thinking about?" somebody asked him.

"Huh, me think?" he answered, swallowing his adam's apple.

Next to Butch Cassidy and Tom Horn and the sheep problem, Joe Ponkey became known and drawn into discussion throughout his range and even farther. There he was, just one of thousands of riders, and perhaps he was the least accomplished of all men who tended cows. Trail herding he was awkward and never just where he ought to be, but sure to ride in and get in the way of the other riders. He'd been known to throw a rope at a horse and draw the noose tight on his foreman's waist, dragging him. He never went to town to celebrate anything. He didn't know the face cards of a poker deck. If somebody read a newspaper aloud, Joe would take the paper and study it upside down or corner-

ways, immensely interested in what he called the talking-figures branded thataway.

Joe Ponkey stayed a season on some ranches; on others he stayed for years. When he rode on he didn't explain why he was leaving.

"I just got the notion!" he would say.

And when he came riding to a ranch, it was apt to be out of the hills or emerging from valleys where there was no trail but game runways. If he didn't quit he was fired —by men sick of the sight of him!

"Gawda'mighty, here comes Joe Ponkey!" a rider would say, looking up from washing behind his ears and seeing Joe approaching with horses that proved his lack of horse *sabe*. Yet this was too much to say, for Joe had just exactly the right horses for the kind of work he could do; namely, tending bands of cattle a manager wanted to keep separate. Thus Joe Ponkey would ride herd on the culls of a ranch, or special shipments of blooded bulls, or cuts of high grade steers for a certain market.

Riders who couldn't stand Joe would ride away when he came in. Sometimes Joe would have to move on because he gave the other men in the crew what was called the willies. Joe never protested. Thrown out, he'd pack and saddle and ride away, never looking back, never answering when curses of conscience and regret and good riddance followed him.

"I never mean no harm!" Joe would say, "Course, if'n I ain't wanted—"

Ranchers, foremen, riders and cooks would watch Joe Ponkey ride away with twisting features, cursing aloud or under their breaths, watching a poor devil of a lackwit till he was out of sight, when they wouldn't watch the best horseman a hundred yards after he'd drawn his time. Butch Cassidy himself couldn't attract more attention, some claimed. Butch, the great Wyoming rider and outlaw, rode from below Kaycee clear down to western Colorado one autumn when he was going to a climate his clothes would fit. Joe was going that way, too, so the two rode together.

"It's so!" Butch declared. "That scoundrel had thirty pounds or so of gold in his saddle pokes."

"You needed money, Butch," a listener said in Rock Springs. "How come you didn't he'p you'se'f?"

"I thought of it," Butch admitted, "but you know, damn me if I could take advantage of Joe Ponkey. He's kinda daffy. Reckon I got Injun blood in me. Yo' know, Injuns neveh bother anybody that's wrong in the mind—crazy!"

Other outlaws were not that superstitious, but Butch was never mean to fellow riders, and Joe Ponkey never harmed anybody. Joe Ponkey didn't like the Arizona-New Mexico cow country. He couldn't stand a land where it took a hundred acres to feed one cow, like on the pasture he worked. He headed back for the land of curly grass and strong gamma. He'd been gone more than two years. The Wyoming and Montana ranges had changed. Plowmen and sports and fugitives from the Middle West had come crowding in. The big ranches were under hard pressure from politics, thieves, and settlers. When a ranch introduced a hundred pure-bred beef bulls, it was lucky if thirty or forty of the special stock showed in the roundups a year later. Homesteaders, nesters, cattle thieves woud take away a bull or two at a time and hide them back in the badlands, and use them for breeding up the culls, or whatever a sneak outfit had in pasture.

Joe Ponkey was needed. The great Fork Horn outfit had had every thoroughbred bull it had imported, fifty-five in number, taken out of its pasture. Three cowboys had ridden out looking for missing bulls, and they never came back. Two were found dead. The third was rumored to have been run out the country—allowed to go when he promised to be good.

Joe Ponkey had never lost any cows of the herds he had tended. Boy and man, he'd go

hungry before he'd leave beef or breeders untended. The word was that he never would bother about himself, but he'd come shooting if trouble troubled his charges in the outlying pastures of an outfit.

The Fork Horn had a hundred bulls coming in. Warcry Wansey, the rancher, was going to get his stock bred up or know the reason why! If he'd get by with forty or fifty of his hundred bulls, he'd feel satisfied. He sure despised Joe Ponkey. Joe had worked for the Fork Horn outfit twelve or fifteen years before. He was good, watching small bunches of cows, but he got on Warcry Wansey's nerves with that open mouthed, hang-jawed, bugeyed stare of his.

Fired, Joe had ridden away. He didn't even sit straight up in his saddle when he left. He had his stirrup straps a little too short and he humped down over his saddlehorn. He snuffled as he rode away, wiping his nose on his shirt sleeve. A whipped dog never sneaked away from an angry master more sorry, ashamed and surprised than Joe Ponkey. Joe never did get used to being fired, though many a rancher sent him away because of that vacant and homely face.

But even Warcry couldn't forget Joe Ponkey, who had never lost a cow when it was given him to tend. There were a hundred bulls to be trailed to the Fork Horn pasture, and out around were homesteads and nesting outfits, where grinning, quiet and lawless men were waiting. Cows were selling for thirty-odd dollars, and here were coming a hundred bulls, for each of which any fence for live breeders would give a hundred dollars. Warcry Wansey had plunged, for he had made the mistake of letting buyers throw back culls instead of making them take the bottom of the herd, rather than the top—the cream of his beef. The hundred bulls were Warcry's hope of staying in the big pasture profession.

WARCRY humbled his pride. He found out that Joe Ponkey was coming north, through Rawlins looking for a job in the Powder River country. Warcry saddled his best horse, put a pack on his second best, and headed out to find Joe. Joe had gone through Casper, or rather around the town. He'd crossed over to Bear Creek, and then stopped at Moss on Antelope Creek. He'd headed out on the road toward Sussex, but left the trail and nobody knew where he went. Warcry circled, for when Joe left a trail it was a sign he was getting ready to cache his gold and find a job.

Joe was aware he was being followed. When Warcry Wansey came through Small Pass, he was suddenly stopped short by a bullet hissing just ahead of his horse.

"Listen, mister!" Joe hailed him, "I don't want to be trailed!"

Warcry told him he had trailed him two hundred miles.

"I want you to work for me," Warcry said.

Joe shook his head. "Yo' fired me. Yo' said yo' neveh in God's world wanted to see my face ag'in!"

Warcry told it on himself. He begged Joe Ponkey's pardon, and he took back all the things he'd ever called that hang-jawed, vacant-staring cowboy.

"Yo' hurt my feelin's, Mist' Wansey," Joe said, "but hit's all right now. I worried about that. I always worry when I'm fired. I cain't eveh fo'git I want all right. Course, all I know is cows!"

"You never lost a cow for anybody," Wansey said. "That's why I'm begging yo' to ride pasture herd to my thoroughbred bulls, Joe."

So the two rode short-cutting back to the Fork Horn ranch. The ranch occupied the Stillwater Creek valley. Into the creek flowed spring runs and up on the runs were spreads where beaver ponds had been filled with silt and sediment, and were now grown to rich lush grass patches. From these filled-in ponds the Fork Horn had lost nobody knew how many beef animals and there fifty-five bulls had vanished.

Up the Stillwater rode Joe Ponkey, with a hundred prime thoroughbred beef bulls. Warcry Wansey sent him a wannigan wagon, like a sheepherder's, to live in. Joe liked the wannigan wagon idea. Nobody else would live with him in that wandering cabin. Nobody would get the willies looking at him. All he had to do was look after the bulls, and keep them from fighting over the cows that were thrown up the creek to pasture with the thoroughbreds.

"Of course, Mist' Wansey, them bulls'll scatter out." Joe explained what Wansey already knew. "I've watched bunches of bulls, course. When theh's a hundred bunches—bulls an' their cows, I don't know. I'd hate awful to dis'point yo' afteh yo' give me a second tryout!"

All through that country the word was around that Warcry Wansey had brought back Joe Ponkey to watch his bulls. This word was bandied about the barrooms, gambling dens and dance halls. Cowboys and ranchers knew what it meant. Homesteaders, nesters and fly-by-nights heard the name Joe Ponkey but it meant nothing to them—just another cowboy in the rumors. What did interest them was the fact that Warcry of the Fork Horn outfit had brought in a hundred bulls. That was news they could use—*hue-e-e!* A hundred prime bulls!

Warcry Wansey personally took pack horse loads of supplies up the creek to keep Joe Ponkey stocked up. Joe was never at the wannigan wagon, but Wansey never got out

the valley before Joe came on his shambling, awkward, yet first class cow horse.

Joe reported all there was to tell about each and every bull and their bunches of cows. Joe told when he had to chase a stray or throw bunches apart, if they got too close. He made sure that his employer knew all the details. Under any other circumstances, Wansey would have been bored by the multiplicity of items. Now he knew more about that part of his pasture than he'd ever known before —about the grass and how the she-stock was feeding, and how some of the bulls went oftener to the block salt than others. Warcry even learned the names and distinctive marks of each bull—Old Prodder, Shorttail, Sidestepper, Water Need, Scatter Cow, and so on.

"If Joe had any brains I'd make him foreman," Warcry Wansey declared, "but all he knows is cows, and the boys can't stand him!"

Riders came in from town and said there was talk about the hundred bulls. There would be. The bull-stealers would not overlook that bet. The plowmen, the squatting nesters, an evil-looking class of strangers had come in, and sooner or later Warcry knew he'd hear from them up the creek where Joe Ponkey was riding herd to his breeders. Once in a while, with nothing else to do, Warcry sent good men riding the line around the rim of the creek basin, looking for suspicious signs. Now and then a rider had crossed that line from out yonder. Perhaps these men were passersby; perhaps they were looking over the pasture for good loot to rustle.

WARCRY and Tom Prunce, his foreman, rode up the creek with supplies for Joe. Some steers had wandered up that way, shippers, and these would have to be rounded down the creek when beef was being sold. Joe wasn't at the wannigan. Warcry rode out north and Prunce rode south, looking up the creek feeders. The foreman found Joe at the upper beaver flae fill. Joe was lying face down behind a boulder.

Bullets had gone through Joe from front to back, five shots; then his left arm was broken, but he'd worked his carbine with his right hand. He had been dead three or four days.

Foreman Prunce galloped up a hill, where he could shoot and the sound would carry across the Sweetwater. He fired three double shots and built a smoke fire. Warcry saw the smoke and came running. He found his foreman at the upper end of the flae, looking things over. Sign showed five men. They'd been riding, driving bulls. There were the tracks of horses and bulls. The horses, still wearing leather, were grazing around, and three bulls were in the grass, having stayed where they were caught by the shooting.

The horses of the rustlers were out around. Two had blotted brands, and three belonged to settlers—two nesters and a homesteader. Of the five men, Warcry and Prunce knew three, the nesters and homesteader. All had carried long guns and revolvers. They had jumped off their horses to shoot it out with Joe Ponkey. He'd got the five, despite the mortal wounds they gave him.

Tom Prunce rode to the ranch for a buckboard and riders. Warcry Wansey stayed with what was left of Joe Ponkey. Joe lay with his ear to the ground. He wore old blue levis and a pair of good boots; his shirt was red and yellow, inch-square colors, a fine hickory. And there was his hat with two bullet holes through it, lying where it had fallen.

When Prunce reached the ranch house, he found Sheriff Haddams and two deputies. They'd come looking around, having heard there might be business at the Fork Horn. This was luck. When the buckboard went out the sheriff was along officially. They found Warcry sitting there, gazing at that prostrate cowboy of his, oblivious to the surroundings —staring at that thick-lipped, jut-nosed face with sloping brow and chin—muttering.

The sheriff and his deputies, all the Fork

(Continued on page 129)

By THOMAS CALVERT

For all others that trail went straight up to God on one side; on the other straight down to the devil. But Phyfe was the kind who would not let either stop him from getting to Kaycee to kill a man!

There was no gun in the dead man's hand, though the fingers were bent grotesquely, as if he were about to shoot—and then a voice behind Phyfe said, "Don't move!"

SUNUP AT KAYCEE

CHAPTER ONE

Last Bullet

MIDWAY of the third morning after that scrambled, day-long rustler fight, Campbell Phyfe came upon the carcass of Ryerson's horse precisely as the .45 slug had dropped it in the trail. The horse had dropped instantly and there were other horse tracks ahead, but there was not a single boot track to show what had happened to Ryerson.

If the man were dead, this made the nine of his original ten men, and the remaining one, Randall Black, Phyfe suspected of being the spy who had tipped off the Ambers bunch that the sixty-man posse was coming. The posse had been organized under a federal marshal and his orders—*account for every Ambers man, living or dead, by five sunups from now, or don't ever call yourselves men again*—was about the last completely clear thought in Phyfe's head.

He had no means of knowing how others had come out, but his own bunch had paid man for man for the toll they took of the Ambers crowd. It was a grim price to pay for the lives of a pack of murdering thieves, but his men had faced it without hesitation. Now he had to finish the job as determinedly.

He was reasonably sure that one rider ahead was Randall Black, but who the other man might be was puzzling. The two riders

were traveling an hour or better apart. It seemed logical that the first man would be an Ambers man making an escape, but he would have heard the shots along the trail and studying the situation from a switchback, would have waited up for whoever killed Ryerson and others. But a marshal's man would have no reason to be first on this trail, unless he had gotten lost or trapped in the tumbled confusion of the Big Horns and was heading for this trail's junction with the old Astorian.

Phyfe had been three full days without hot food or fire, one full day with no food whatever, and half a day on rationed water. His trail had been constantly up grade into these desolate reaches of the Big Horns, except when he had criss-crossed impossible stretches of boulder fields and bogs in getting from trail to trail.

The fight had started when Ambers ambushed the posse, but it had busted wide and handsome all over the landscape, and now it reminded him of the old Jackson County war. He had been in a tough pickle then, something like this, and just by God's luck had run in with Jack Douglas, a man to stand at your back if there ever was one.

Remembering Jack, he had an utterly spent man's moment of weakness and wished the old rawhide was there now. He had a dim idea of having actually seen Jack somewhere in the dust of battle. But fatigue had robbed his veins of blood and was like a long sucking wind at the marrow of his bones. He was above timberline in the scrub country and height was getting him. Conscious of these things, he knew he had not seen Jack. It was a confusion of memory and fatigue.

Kneeling beside Ryerson's dead horse and failing again to cut sign on a boot track, he closed his bleak blue eyes and squeezed them tight. Lifting his square, blunt face, he ran a calloused hand around it, slowly and hard. When he opened his eyes again, the endless weariness was still in him like a stain, but blood was running in his neck and his thoughts were clearer. A horseman could not vanish into thin air, and certainly could not scale that sheer rock wall. The only other direction was down.

MAKING a quarter pivot upon one knee, he studied the bare field of dead brown slab and shale that pitched toward the black chasm for a full thousand feet. There was no way of cutting for sign in this chill leaden light. A body striking the precarious pitch of that grade rolled too fast to leave much trail. In any case, these shale fields were always on the move.

Three times he closed his eyes to rest them, and then went back over every foot of field. Finally, he found the thing he sought—not a man's outline, but a scant blob of white that might be a man's face. It was the only white thing in that field, and it lay against a square slab five hundred feet down grade.

Dead, he thought, but a man hated to trust sight. Yet it was too treacherous footing for a weak man to risk the climb. Finally, he took a different risk and, cupping his hands, called down.

The sound of his voice was like a call of death through the utter silence of that world of space. He listened intently, but no slightest murmur answered him except a slide of rocks.

"Dead," he repeated at length, and pulled to his feet. This left only Randall Black unaccounted for.

Phyfe poked back his hat and stood with his boots spaced and his head lowered, staring at the ground. His gun's weight was enormous in his condition, and he felt the impulse to heave it away. He had only one bullet left in any case, but there were still those two men ahead and he might make that bullet count.

He moved to his canteen and sucked out a careful sip, and then turned his attention to the bare, desolate country ahead that reared up straight into the leaden sky. He was struck by the grim humor of the fact that, except for random pockets of water, a man could thirst to death up here from where most of the water came. When those clouds opened, the peaks turned to actual sheets of water. An hour later, the dead, steep rock had shed every drop down wild gorges that a man could not reach.

"God's country!" he muttered grimly, and warning his horse to brace itself, swung back into his saddle.

At the turn he got down again to cut for sign and from it could just about picture how Ryerson had been shot. It was definitely the second rider who had killed him. The other set of tracks was a little older—by perhaps an hour.

He blew against wide thin lips, scowling as he tried to fathom this. It did not make sense. The man in the middle had to be with one side or the other. There was only one way to find out, and he took it, feeling the strain and pull upon his muscles as he swung up again to his saddle.

He was high now; even the low brush was petering out. The altitude was telling on his heart and breath, the grueling slowness of his pony's pace, its increasing need to rest. There was nothing here but cold and wind and rock. *Straight up to God on one side; on the other, straight down to the devil,* he thought as he considered that, any instant now, his exhausted horse might drop.

The sound of the shot rattled his dozing brain awake. It was followed instantly by that terrible noise—a horse's scream. Somewhere

above and beyond him there was the heavy thump of a body and the gathering roar of a slide of rock.

He drew rein, thinking sharply, *That is one or the other and the horse went over the trail. That leaves one man—but on which side?*

HE SAT there perhaps an hour, not sorry for the needed rest. On this stretch of trail it was impossible to get afoot. There was not room. His mind went over the details of the fight and chase again, item by item, yet completely impersonally and detachedly in the way of a man floating far out at sea. Across the continuity of the thought images floated other random memories—the changing quality of the light; the gradual increase of the penetrating cold; the shrill and wicked song of the night winds beginning in the deepening shadows of the gorges down below.

After a time he shivered and came out of his semi-conscious daze. Any man with sense would have turned back six hours ago. But he was Phyfe, not any man with sense, and the marshal had said, *Get every last Ambers man.*

He had to spur his horse roughly to begin the slow climb again. There was a small, flat-floored gully that gave onto the trail ahead. Here and there it held a sprinkling of brush and water. The remaining man would camp there, he judged, and he would come on the other just about dusk.

The rock shoulder scraped him rounding the last corner, so narrow was the trail. Then it broadened abruptly and over a steep grade, flattened. In the middle of this short space, a man's figure sprawled.

The light was now a thick and dirty gray, and from his saddle, Phyfe could not tell who the man was. He raised his head and took a deep breath for smell of smoke and then listened intently, but heard no sound ahead. It was a chance, but risk had dulled its edge after the last three days, and shortly he climbed down stiffly from the saddle, steadying himself.

He had to bend over the man and turn him, and then peer closely at the worn and bearded face. This was Randall Black all right, shot squarely through the head. He had one arm thrown out and the fingers of his gun hand were bent grotesquely as if he had been just about to shoot. But there was no gun in his hand and it had not been ripped out.

"Must have pitched it as he died," Phyfe thought, and then heard the chilling command as he stood up.

"Don't move!"

The grim voice had a familiar ring. He sought back into memory even as he froze and asked, "Who goes?"

There was a long pause and the crunch of footsteps, then silence from the man he could not see. Abruptly there came the hard breathed query. "Why, gawda'mighty, is that you, Campbell Phyfe?"

"Jack Douglas?" Phyfe grunted as his memory caught. "Why you old coot—so you were in this!"

"In it all right," Douglas growled. "But not out. My horse went down. By the looks of it, yores is broke and we are stranded to hell and gone up here atop the world."

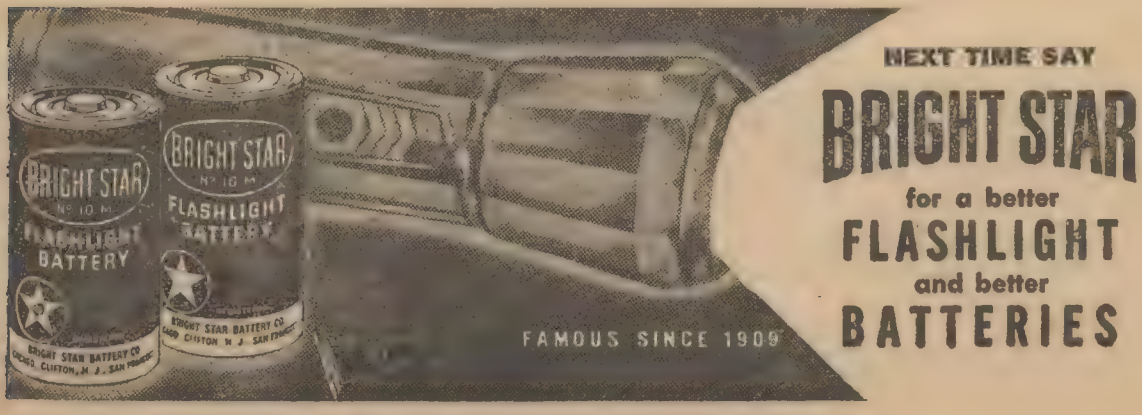
The footsteps came nearer as Phyfe turned. Douglas said through flattened lips. "That mangy dog tried to shoot me in the back, but it is bad luck his horse reared over."

He prodded Black's body once with his toe and then looked at Phyfe, grinning and holstering his gun. "It was a whangaroo of a fight, wasn't it, old son?"

They stood for a space peering at each other through the deeping dusk, conveying to each other the unspoken thoughts and feelings of two old friends who have ridden a rough trail together.

"Damn, I wish I'd known you were in the riot!" Douglas grunted finally. "Better one than that last massacre when we hired out for the county war in Arizona."

"A long time back," Phyfe grinned, and



felt the awakening warmth of friendship discovered in a place of lonely death. "We were in a bad jam then!"

"But we got out," Douglas said. "Mebbe between us, one will win through now." He made a sudden irritated popping noise of his lips and dropped his head. Phyfe could picture him scowling at the dark. "Life is too damn grim in this country," Douglas said.

He made a gesture and then grunted, "Haul in yore hoss before it pitches over," and turning, hobbled off for the gully that gave onto the trail.

"The pore critter's spent," Phyfe admitted as they took stock. "Its hoofs are split clean through. Yores dropped under you?"

"Not quite. Got me here, took a drink and dropped dead. Nothing in my gear worth anything except a rope, canteen, knife and saddle bags we can cut for boot soles. There is some brush in here, but I got no matches."

Phyfe chuckled. He had matches and coffee, but no food. He did have a good blanket.

"Hell, we're rich!" Douglas yipped. "I plumb forgot I got corn and hoss steaks won't turn my stomach! Old son, we are going to have us a feast, and I can use it!"

The brush was scarce and they had to eat their steaks and sourdoughs half raw. But there was warmth in the food, and life, and there was plenty of water, and two men beneath a good blanket could survive the knifing cold. They found some overlooked brush to warm coffee for breakfast, and to men half dead with fatigue, even raw meat tastes good.

During the night, Phyfe's pony had died. In the freezing dawn of the high altitude they began unshucking every ounce of useless gear. "I sure hate to do this," Douglas said and he patted his gun and cached it. He looked at Phyfe with a twinkle in his slaty eyes. "You'da been reasonable safe last evenin' even if we weren't friends."

"Out of powder?"

"One left."

Phyfe chuckled. "Same here."

CHAPTER TWO

Storm

THERE were a few other items to cache —some money, their coats and blankets, their saddle gear.

"Sure hate to leave all that meat to the buzzards," Phyfe grunted, but an extra pound could kill them on this trail. What they needed most, anyway, was fire and water.

"Reckon we're like to be all that's left, the way hell was apoppin," Douglas noted.

"The marshal took Ambers back to Powder River," Phyfe told him.

"And they slept in a warm bed!" Douglas growled. Then he grinned and stuck out his hand. "Mebbe one of us will get through for the hanging! All set?"

Phyfe nodded as they tied the rope between them. "Our chance is straight across to Kaycee. Goats wouldn't try it."

"We couldn't hit the old Astorian?"

"Too far," Phyfe told him. He jerked his head at the thick moil of leaden clouds. "When that water dumps, it'll stop us anywhere. Unless we're down to brushwood, we'll freeze."

"Yore country," Douglas allowed and tested his knot. "Let's see, tomorrow sunup was the deadline the marshal set."

"That's right," Phyfe nodded. "Reckon we don't have to worry which side Black was on."

"He didn't smell right on any side," Douglas grunted. "Let's hobble, son."

Phyfe led out, wondering silently how far they would get before disaster overtook them. There was no wind, thank God! They were right in the midst of clouds. At times he could not see the trail at his feet and had to feel along the cold wet wall. For an hour, he knew Douglas was still with him only by the tautness of the rope.

In an hour he paused and gave warning back to Douglas to take in slack as he came up. A trip on that trail could be fatal. Their lungs were heaving and their hearts hammering in their ears. Their knees shook like castanets.

"If we pass the breakthrough here, we're sunk," Phyfe gasped. "How far have we come you reckon?"

"Mebbe a mile," Douglas considered.

Phyfe gave a cracked laugh. "Yo're bad off as me! A mile in this swirl in high heels would be good going for fresh men. We're half froze."

They sprawled down against the dripping wall to rest and the stretch of Phyfe's legs sent a stone crashing off the trail ledge. "Nice friendly country hereabouts," Douglas grunted. "Wish I hadn't run out of tobaccy."

After a long space they got to their feet and struck out again. Phyfe found himself unconsciously hugging the wall. It had rubbed a hole at his shoulder and his right elbow was raw. He noticed then for the first time that he was staggering, and that his sense of balance and direction were awry. At briefer and briefer intervals now they had to stop for breath. The whole world that closed them in was nothing but a wet, gray light, yet his eyes were stinging as from desert glare.

Pauses to blow were growing closer. Fifty steps, thirty steps, ten steps—Phyfe counted them. The last stop was nine steps. No power in him could drag his quivering legs forward that extra one.

He sent back a cracked, raw call to take in,

and Douglas was a long long time coming that sixty feet. When he got there, Phyfe was lying back against the wall gasping and sobbing. Douglas was nearly as badly off.

"We've missed the breakthrough," Phyfe rasped brokenly. "We must have."

"Cross draught?" Douglas gasped.

"How would we know?" Phyfe demanded and needed to add no explanation. They were both so dazed they might be walking in their sleep. They could pass a dozen openings and not notice one.

"We had a spell like this after the County War," Douglas recalled. "Only then it was sand. I wanted to turn back, I recollect."

"We counted 'em," Phyfe remembered. "How many steps did we go forward?"

"Forty-nine."

PHYFE answered with an expressive suck of breath. The memory put new heart in him. Even against the dazed condition of his mind he wondered at the small weaknesses that will throw strong men, and at the even smaller things that will put heart back into men half dead.

"Let's go," he grated and pulled heavily to his feet.

It took an eternity. Twenty steps—twenty-five—God in heaven, how could an easy thing like one more step rip the very guts and heart right out of a man? Thirty nine steps. . . .

Just ten more, he told himself crazily. *Just nine*—no, I'll give it six extra for good measure. Just six extra steps to make sure. . . . He was still gritting that berserkly to himself when the wall he was crawling against vanished and he fell violently to the right.

Don't let it be just a crack! he prayed. But he was strengthless and addled and could not move and could not bring his mind to put values on small signs and make sure.

It was minutes after Douglas piled on top of him that the latter was able to sit up and cackle, "It's it, Cam Phyfe! The mists are streaming like a river!"

Phyfe sat up beside him and both just sat there laughing like idiots. Phyfe stopped abruptly, his mind steadied by a memory out of nowhere. Weeks before, when his hip pocket had ripped, he had jammed a piece of tobacco down the narrow tool pocket in his jeans.

He fought frantically for it. He fought that pocket as if it were a cougar. He was so spent he had to fight—he had to fight just to breathe. He found the plug and held it up in a trembling hand.

"Look," he rasped. "Four full chews!"

They had found gold together once when they were kids, but the excitement of it had been no greater than this. They sat there staring at the dark blob in the thick pearl light, feeling it and caressing it as if it were a great jewel. Then they had a long, gasped argument who would take first chew.

The tobacco gave them strength and cleared their minds; not even food could give the immediate stimulation of a good chew. For the first time since breaking camp, they could really use their heads.

"One lone man in history," Phyfe said finally, "got through from here to Kaycee and he was too crazy to remember how. Two men made it another time and only remembered a gorge to cross." He looked around at his friend grimly. "If rain hits us first or that gorge is this side timberline, we will decorate the trail."

"Too good for that," Douglas growled. His vitality was stronger by three days' warm food. "I've bought me an expensive spot on boothill."

Their worn faces twisted with what they thought were grins, and they got back to their feet. The draw sucked the clouds down over them like a river, but the heat of the sun on this side had begun to warm the rocks and they made out the downtrail a little ahead of

them. Suddenly they were beneath the clouds and stopped dead. What they were climbing down was not an ordinary gulch or draw, but a damned chimney.

"Awful high ladder," Douglas grunted. "I dunno but I'd rather not seen it!"

They grinned and then blew and steadied the trail beneath. In places, the pitch was seventy-five grade. A ray of sunlight slanted obliquely through the clouds upon a low hill several miles away. Phyfe noted the angle and muttered, "Eleven o'clock. It has taken us about five hours to make two miles."

"That is a right ugly looking hill," Douglas considered. "I recollect one like that left me skinned an' blooded as a rabbit once down Texas way."

"We have to crawl over this one, too," Phyfe told him emotionlessly. "Do we jump down this chimney or take it easy?"

"Take yore pick. There's a nice landing ledge about two thousand feet down there. Looks soft, too."

They gave each other a look of hard humor and Phyfe led out again. Without a man you'd chummed with, you'd be lost getting down at all. The entire chimney had to be dropped by stages, the leader skidding and tumbling, counting on the anchor man to catch him and looking for fresh anchor spots as he passed.

At the bottom, Phyfe felt battered senseless and Douglas' back felt broken.

They threw themselves down on a rock and lay there gasping. They were still in rock country. They were dripping sweat, but in moments they were chill and raw and chattering and needed a fire badly after their licking.

"There is brush on the side of that slant gorge but it is all damned high up," Douglas was saying when Phyfe's wild yell battered his ears.

"Good God, get out of here!"

The storm had broken in the higher peaks above and a solid sheet of silver was hurtling down the chimney right over them. There is an instinctive desperation in men that surpasses weakness, and it took possession of them now as no courage could. Phyfe yelled, "That ledge!" and pointed, and they raced through boulders for the wall down which the chimney cut.

The ledge was twenty feet above them and Phyfe knew that, weakened as he was, he could not have made the throw. Douglas made it on his third try, snagging the rope just as the sound of the cascade became a deafening roar, and the first wild surge of water smashed and rioted across the rock floor.

Neither man knew how, or where, he got the strength to scramble up the rope.

CHAPTER THREE

Sunup at Kaycee

THEY huddled on the ledge, their whole bodies battered by the single element of noise, watching the big shelf beneath them turn into a leaping frothing hell of waters gone absolutely mad. Boulders higher than a man were whipped around like pebbles. The suck of the draw became a separate screech threading through the roar, and then with waves jolting and grabbing at them, the roar of the falls began to drop. Shortly there was only the smashing of waters at their feet and the dropping whine of the runoff gorge, and in minutes there was no sign of the berserk lake except a network of trickles.

The two men looked at each other and they were gray. "I will take Brahmas and bullets to that any day!" Douglas allowed through tight lips.

"If you can pray," Phyfe said. "Pray now. We have got to work our way down that gorge. That must be the gorge the old-timers talked about."

They let themselves down and cleared the rope. Giving the chimney a look of mixed fear and fury and respect, they began moving down the slippery wet bed of the gorge. The avalanche of water had left the place icy cold.

Suddenly Douglas pulled short on the rope and called sickly, "Go on without me, Phyfe."

Phyfe turned and found Douglas shaking violently with shivers and clinging to a rock. The cold and wetness had gotten at the bigger man the hardest and in rough travel there is no answer to the shakes. Douglas had misstepped and sprawled out a dozen times, and his whole body was a mass of bleeding cuts and bad bruises.

Phyfe looked around but there was no brush on the walls that could be reached and the cold was getting at him too. Then a brief shaft of golden light slanted through the clouds and brought detail out of the flat and somber landscape below. This gorge or chute cut down through a shelf, the whole of which pitched steeply to a basin floor. Unknowingly, they had passed timberline, and sparse, stunted trees showed over the edge of a narrow ravine that gave into the gorge.

"Firewood!" Phyfe chattered gratingly, and that single word brought the surge of desperate determination Douglas needed. In minutes they had struggled up the ravine and found dry wood, and from Phyfe's waterproof matchbox, had a fire going.

They made a batter of cornmeal paste the best they could and cooked it in the ashes and topped this off with half a handful of dry coffee on which they chewed. Cutting fresh soles for their boots, Douglas grunted.

"Damned if I couldn't eat these boots too."

"We'll have breakfast," Phyfe told him with sudden surety, "in Kaycee." He had spied a goat trail running parallel with the gorge, and that meant comparatively easy going.

Warmed and dried and fed in a way, the depression drained off them, leaving the grim and violent determination to survive that belongs to their breed. They were still high, but not at the dizzying altitudes. They had covered the worst of the way if rain still held off. Phyfe had just grunted that thought when they came up against a sheer black gorge that chopped clean across the shelf from wall to wall and blocked their way.

They stopped dead and glared at it angrily. This, then, was the gorge the old timers had meant, and not the chute down which they had come. Along its edge they found the trace of a large old stump, but the solitary big tree which had probably lain across the gorge had long since gone. No other tree in sight was big enough, even if they had the means of felling it across.

"I make that about five rods wide," Douglas grated. "But even if I could make the throw and lock the rope, I ain't got the strength to pull myself over."

Phyfe answered him with the half note of a harsh laugh. They were both pretty near the end of their strength. Another night in the open, hurt, worn out and unprotected as they were, would finish them. At best, they would greet morning without the strength to walk. If the rains came out of the peaks they would not greet morning at all. And the gray light was beginning to soften with tints of mulberry and lavender hues. Far away, the angle of a slicing golden ray was getting low.

"We've got no choice," Phyfe said. "We have got to get across right now."

Douglas' lips twitched. He did not laugh or speak.

"There is a crack in that far wall of the gorge," Phyfe pointed out. "If a man could be swung and get a foothold there, he could make the top—if he had the strength to climb."

Douglas gave him a level look. It was not the first time men had done this trick, and the breaks went with the first man over. A frayed rope, a lot of things, could happen after that. Partly for that reason, and partly because the lightest man could anchor the rope if he could not stand the pull, the smaller man was always first. Douglas said emotionlessly, "Get set to drop over then."

"I haven't got the strength to make the climb," Phyfe told him. "You have. You had hot food and fire for three days that I didn't, and by the pound, you were always a stronger man, Jack."

"This is no time for manners," Douglas growled and began a careful examination of the rope. "If I get over, yo're good as there. But you might get over where I can't, and the man left here is stranded."

"I'm thinking of that, and it means more than me. I've got a feeling I want to be in Kaycee by dawn, Jack."

Douglas shot him a glance. "Got a hunch an Ambers man might be left alive and be there?"

"That's it," Phyfe nodded.

"Ain't changed a damned bit since we was kids," Douglas said with the first ghost of a smile he'd dragged out in hours. "Recollect you had to clear up some unfinished business after everybody else was shot up and the County War was over the same way." He tossed over the end of the rope. "Well, this is it," he said as he knotted his sling.

Phyfe took measurement on the length of the arc by measuring with his knife held at arm's length. He said, "This spot should do for you to go over and the ledging is rolled. But when I go over I am going to be coming straight at that wall, mister, so pull in all the slack you can."

"Protect yore gun arm, son," Douglas growled, and with Phyfe braced by a tree and playing out rope, the big man went over the edge into the chasm.

At the end of the rope, Phyfe yelled and heard the peculiarly hollow answer of Douglas voice from below. He could feel the strangling pull of the rope through his whole body as the heavy man began to swing. Douglas missed three times. Each of those long arcs pulled so that Phyfe turned dead white. Yet he had to keep shifting the length of the rope an inch or better so that stone burn would not be over the stone again for the next swing.

Suddenly, the terrible pull relaxed and after a space the call sang out, "Pay in! This crack is slippery." Then Douglas was standing right across from him, breathing hard and wiping bloody hands, but grinning grimly.

"Come on over, son, we got a date at Kaycee!"

Phyfe wigwagged, moved forward of the stone burns and set the sling under his armpits. For a brief space he stood staring into the thick black shadows of the gorge. He could take an angle, but not as good a one as Douglas, due to the fact he had to jump—there was no way for him to be let down.

He lifted his head and looked across at Douglas and nodded once. "Here comes," he called and jumped. The other wall came at him with a roar, and smashed him like an avalanche. He felt himself falling and had the one dim thought through crashing lights that the rope had snapped. Then howling darkness engulfed him.

HE COULD see a star at an immeasurable distance, but he fuzzily concluded he was in hell because fire was blazing and crackling right beside him. Then he felt the wet neckerchief rubbed across his forehead and the back of his neck. Douglas' face formed out of the splitting, light-shot darkness.

Phyfe gasped, "That damned wall came up and hit me!" and in his condition experienced honest anger. "The rain cleared!"

"Not even a drop," Douglas said. He shot Phyfe a curiously amused look. "That means we can travel drybed, son, instead of scraping our way over that sandstone mountain."

"A lot easier, but a lot longer," Phyfe said.

"You'll never tackle that mountain after the way you hit that wall and be in Kaycee by sunup," Douglas pointed out.

"I dunno what the hell I got my mind set on that for," Phyfe grumbled.

"You were born that way," Douglas said.

They took the last of a pocketful of coffee and munched on it and, starting out, had their last chew of tobacco for dessert. The wall had caught Phyfe on his left shoulder first; he was sore all over, but his gun arm and his legs were reasonably all right. They hobbled down the mountain, hitting a well-worn cow trail a thousand feet down. They pushed on and came on the drybed at midnight.

They used their last match for a fire, rested and started out with a decent moon for light. The bed of the river was packed sand and after their rough trail was like a dance floor. For all that, the early morning wind had begun to drift when they stumbled into Kaycee and found the last light at Horan's bar.

Horan stared at them from a poker table and the cigar fell out of his face unnoticed. His shock at their appearance was so complete he could not even ejaculate a curse.

"Never mind," Phyfe rasped in a voice he could not recognize himself. "Set out the best. Put on four steaks. And give us two matched guns."

"You, Phyfe!" Horan wheezed and then added with alacrity. "Yessir, right away!" which was a great compliment from him.

He set out the bottle, and put steaks to sizzling and came back with the guns and a box of ammunition. "These do? They got all the Ambers outfit, though—you won't need a gun right off."

The two men felt the heft of the guns and exchanged a look. They were good guns and they drew a gun hand's appreciation.

The steaks came on and they devoured them with quarts of coffee, and then sprawled back for a cigar. "Damned near sunup," Douglas grinned. "We ought to be in bed."

"I don't think they're right about the Ambers bunch," Phyfe answered. He drew deep, savored his cigar and studied the ash. "I might go down if I'm right, Jack, but I will black out damned glad of coming off that mountain in good company."

"It had been a long time and it was a good meeting," Douglas grunted. "And a good bottle of liquor, son!"

They tossed it off as the first touch of gold began to thread the gray outside. Phyfe reached the box of bullets.

He said, "After coming across that gorge, I'm superstitious as hell. We met with only one bullet and now I've got some business to attend to, but I'll part the same way."

He spun the chamber, dropped the shell in position, and shut his gun. Douglas said with a man's satisfaction at an old friend, "Haven't changed one damned bit!"

They nodded at Horan and hobbled like a couple of cripples for the door. The sun was just coming over the horizon.

"I'm turning left as far as Dwyer's," Phyfe said. "If I am wrong about finding an Ambers man in town, I will see you later in the day."

"I'm turning upstreet about the same distance," Douglas said. "If yo're right, make that bullet count!"

The two stood a moment looking dead square at each other, smiling in the way of two tough, but dead weary, old friends at parting. Then they shook hands, moved down the steps together, and with a murmured word turned their separate ways.

At Dwyer's, Phyfe glanced into the lobby, took a draw of his cigar and tossed it out into the dust. Then he stepped over it and ducked under the hitchrail, and moved toward the center of the street. Eighty feet upstreet, Douglas was almost in time with him.

Douglas shook his head once with a tough man's tickled fondness for a friend and called down, "No sirree, haven't changed one damned bit!" and wigwagged.

They both drew and they both fired at the same instant. Douglas sagged slowly forward, half twisted, and dropped into the dust. Phyfe ran upstreet and knelt over him and saw he was not dead, but would be.

In a burst of sudden remorse he grated, "I could have missed and the sun would have been on us!"

"No sirree, son," Douglas said huskily. A proud smile tore across his lips. "That's yore way and what makes you. It is why I brought you across that gorge instead of just letting the rope slip." He gave a grin and died.

Somebody raced over and stared and yelled, "Hell, it's Jack Douglas, that hired gunhand and last of the Ambers bunch! How did you know him, Phyfe?"

"Well," Phyfe answered briefly. A hot hardness gripped his throat. "As well as I'll ever know any man."

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 97)

WHOA there, pardner! Rein in your cayuse, pull up a spell, and let's find out how much know-how you have about cowpuncher subjects and the West in general. Below are listed twenty questions. Draw down on 'em, fire away, and see how many of them you can call the turn on. If you can answer eighteen or more, then you're definitely in the *mayordomo* bracket. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're still up there at the top. Answer fifteen, and nobody could truthfully call you a greenhorn. Good luck, *amigo!*

1. If an old Western friend of yours told you he was going to organize a "tree squeak hunt," would you immediately procure your rifle?

2. Where in the West do you think you would be most likely to find an "Irish baby buggy?" Around the cattle trail up from Texas? Where loggers are working in the woods, far from their base camp? Where intensive mining activity is being carried on?

3. A "donkey puncher" is: A logger who runs a certain type of engine? A cowboy whose specialty is wrangling burros? A tenderfoot who is afraid to ride a horse, but will ride a burro?

4. If a cowpuncher referred to a certain article of livestock as an "animal," you would know he was talking about a --------?

5. What is an arroyo?

6. True or false? A "bonanza" could be defined as "a hole in the ground owned by a champion liar."

7. True or false? The "buffalo range" is a thickly populated region.

8. What is the definition of a "cavvie-yard?"

9. True or false? A "contract buster" is a cowpuncher who leaves his job before the time originally agreed to leave.

10. In the West, you would be most apt to find *frijoles*: In the Rocky Mountain area? Up north, particularly in the logging regions. Down in the Southwest near the Mexican border? In the state of Wyoming?

11. In the slanguage of the Westerner, what is the difference between a "hoe down" and a "hoe dig?"

12. Where would you be most likely to find that far-famed creature known as the "timber beast?"

13. A cowpuncher will often refer to a dangerous low-hanging limb of a tree as a --------?

14. If a friend of yours at the card table told you he was going to "holler calf rope" in a few minutes, what would you think he was planning to do?

15. What is the name of the mythical person in the West to whom responsibility for all hangings is laid?

16. A cowpuncher who is riding without spurs and with stirrups untied is said to be riding "in the slick." True or false?

17. True or false? According to the old Western definition of the term, a "leggings case" is a cowpuncher who has violated some law and who, as a result, is stroked with a pair of leggings.

18. What is a "parker?"

19. What is the difference between a "night wrangler" and a "nighthawk?"

20. If the ranch boss sent you out to look after the "peeps," what would you do, and what would you be dealing with?

DEAD MAN'S CLAIM

CHAPTER ONE

Fire and Blood

OVER the last mile of that hard half-hour ride, Ed Hughes could see that he was too late. So he drew in on the badly-winded bay as he took the steep-drifted trail down the face of the ridge, seeing the blaze directly for the first time.

It had lost its orange brightness and now nothing but a low cherry-

Ed Hughes had to prove to the town he needed killing—before they'd let him kill!

The beginning of a smile touched Ed's face as he stepped back, gun ready once more. . . .

red mound of glowing logs laid its rosy tint across the snowy flat below. Out of it stood the black outline of fireplace and chimney, all that remained of Sam Gardner's cabin.

In the far fence-corner of the yard were several figures grouped by a heap of furniture, everything that had been salvaged from the ruin. He rode over and recognized Lola

By PETER DAWSON

Gardner and her two children bundled tightly in blankets against the cold—and Nan Soule.

Nan had turned as he approached and now came over to the fence. The others only stared lifelessly at him.

His glance ran over the yard and the farther shadows toward the barn and his first word was, "Sam?"

"He's down at the corral after the horses," Nan told him.

In the bitter cold her breath laid a misty vapor about her head and now she came close enough so that he could see the tears and the anger brightening her hazel eyes. "Ed, they've lost everything—everything but what you see. I—I didn't know I'd ever hate anyone as I do Pete Card."

"It was Card?" he asked tonelessly. His ordinarily pleasant-looking face showed a grimness, all its angles sharpened and hard. The hardness showed most in his brown eyes, their color deeper and brighter than usual.

"Who else would it be?"

She turned with a restless lift of the shoulders and stared at the cabin's ruin, a tall bare-headed girl wearing boots, a dark riding skirt and a heavy plaid wool coat. He could see her features cleanly etched against the dying blaze, strong and well-moulded and set in anger, and the glow touched her tawny hair with a golden light. Even in this moment when he had wholly forgotten himself, she had the power to stir his deep interest.

"Did Sam see anything?" he asked.

"Three men with their faces covered. Only one did any talking. He didn't recognize the voice."

He pushed down the top strand of barb-wire and stepped over the fence and walked across through the heavy snow and said to Lola Gardner, "I can get the bunkhouse straightened around and a fire goin' before you're halfway to my place, ma'am. You're welcome to stay as long as you want." He reached down and rumpled the hair of the youngest, drawling, "Charley, I need an extra hand on the place. You're hired if you'll take the job."

As her boy smiled his delight, Lola Gardner's thin tired face eased from its tension and bewilderment. She gave him a look of gratitude.

"Thank you, Mr. Hughes. But Miss Soule's offered to take us in."

HE WAS aware of Nan standing close beside him and half turned to her. "Sort of crowd you, won't it? I have room to spare and need the company."

"That would be better for all of you, Mrs. Gardner," Nan agreed. "I could bring extra blankets and—"

"We saved the blankets," Lola Gardner cut in with a strange edge of pride to her voice. "We can make out."

"Then it's settled." Ed stepped away, adding, "I'll go give Sam a hand."

He heard Sam Gardner before he saw him, the homesteader's deliberate cursing overriding the crisp stillness. Sam was in the deep shadows at the far edge of the barn, harnessing the team, and shortly he saw Ed coming and his oaths broke off. Then, with Ed halfway across the corral, he began again.

"Damn' lantern. Thought it was out here and all the time it was in the kitchen. One more thing gone. Ed, they put a shot through the door and one of 'em yelled. 'Ten minutes to clear your junk out before we touch 'er off, Gardner.'

"Hell, Lola ain't even yet had time to dress proper. Just pulled that old coat on over her nightgown and got busy with the kids. Kept tellin' me, 'Now mind you don't forget the sewin' machine, Sam Gardner.' Over and over again till finally I says, 'Lola, for the love o' God, shut up.' Never laid my tongue to her before in all our married days, Ed. Never."

Ed was helping him now, straightening out the tangled harness, speaking quietly to the team still edgy from the past frightening hour.

He said, knowing Sam's need to get his nerve back, "Couple of months now the snow'll be gone and you can put up a new cabin, a better one. If this is the worst thing that ever happens to you, you've had a soft life, friend."

"No, Ed. I'm finished here," was Sam's lifeless answer. "First it was Gates, then Abe Travis—now, me. And all because we got tired workin' for the other man and decided to have a try on our own. I was careful, too. Didn't want to step on anyone's toes. So I come 'way off here on land no one give a damn about and made my start, peaceable-like. It was the same with the rest. We stretched wire to keep the cattle out. Just a few damned acres in all this hellish big land. Then along comes a no-good saddle tramp, nothin' but a two-bit rustler, and decides to run us out. Pete Card. Why'd he do it, Ed? I can't understand it, can't even begin to."

"Neither can I," Ed said. He had finished the job while Sam talked and now added, "Let's be movin'."

But Sam was too full of his troubles to be stopped now. "Pete Card. Until a year ago, not one of you trusted him further'n you could see through a January blizzard. Now you let him crack the whip over us."

"Don't include me in that," Ed drawled mildly. He was feeling the cold more now and turned up the collar of the heavy sheepskin and stamped his boots.

"No, not you," Sam agreed readily enough. "But them others. Now take—"

He broke off, turning in the direction of a sound riding the night's stillness. The sound strengthened and soon they could identify it as the squeal of a light rig's iron tires against the snow.

"More visitors," Sam said, following Ed and the team out of the corral. "Ain't there a man on this range with guts enough to tackle Card, to call his bluff?"

"Some don't want to," Ed told him. "The rest are careful. Card's dangerous."

"Who says so?" Sam bridled. They had left the team by the barn's narrow ramp and now he came in alongside Ed to lift the wagon's tongue and start it down the slight incline into the barnlot. "Ain't no one ever seen Card draw that I know of. Sure, he killed Jeff Bannister and Jeff was known to be fast. But who knows it was a fair fight? Card likely shot him through the back."

Ed had been looking off toward the yard and said briefly, "Ralph Mayne."

Sam, following his glance, saw a man's big blocky shape out there and, beyond the fence, a team and a buckboard. He snorted irritably, "Now what's he doin' here?"

"Came down to help, maybe."

"I don't want none o' Ralph Mayne's help," Sam said with meaning, adding, "Not this kind, anyway. If he wants to help, let him sic his crew onto Card. Or freeze him by closin' down on his credit. If I owned a big brand and a bank and saw somethin' like this goin' on, damned if I wouldn't lay off makin' money long enough to put a stop to it."

They worked around the team silently for a minute or two, until Sam asked abruptly, "What's Card's next step? Tell me that, what'll he do next?"

"Anybody's guess," Ed answered. He walked over and closed the corral gate, all at once so absorbed in this question Sam had put him that only after the gate was shut did he realize it no longer mattered about the corral.

Striding back to Sam in the awkward way of the saddle-bred man unused to walking, he said, "Maybe I do have an answer to that. But what's yours?"

"Next thing Card does is crowd out the small brands," Sam told him, adding ominously, "That includes you."

THEY climbed to the wagon seat, Ed considering Sam's reply. Driving out across the barnlot toward the cabin, he realized how concisely the homesteader had voiced a problem that had been on his mind for weeks now. This trouble was pointing to something beyond, something bigger than the

annoying of a few farmers. But what was it?

Putting the wagon over to the yard's far corner, he set his worry aside at sight of Ralph Mayne standing there beside Nan, waiting for them to drive up. He was always on edge around Mayne and that feeling was in him now, a feeling that was a blending of awe and respect and, perhaps, jealousy.

Sam was the first to speak as they drew rein. "Evenin', Mr. Mayne," he said in a sober respectful way.

"Good evening, Gardner," Mayne answered. "Or rather, it's a bad evening. This is terrible." He was a massive man, looking comfortable in his heavy dark coat with its fur collar.

"Ain't it?" Sam said.

He and Ed came aground and Ed walked over to the untidy mound of things that had been saved from the cabin.

"Any idea who did it?" he heard Mayne ask.

"Ideas, sure. But nothin' to prove 'em."

"I suppose Card's your guess. Well, he's mine, too. We're going to have to do something about Card."

"Really, Ralph?" Nan said eagerly, looking up at him. "If only you would."

"You'll see," was Mayne's sober reply. But then a change came in his tone and he said almost lightly, "Now, Gardner, you and your wife and children come right on in to town and put up at the hotel for a while. My rooms there are yours for as long as you want them."

"That's kind of you," Lola Gardner was quick to say. "But Mr. Hughes has offered us his bunkhouse. It's close enough so we'll be able to come down here and do some work. Not that we aren't grateful for the offer, Mr. Mayne."

"Need anything at all?" Mayne insisted. "Money, clothes?"

"Nothin'," Sam Gardner said in a clipped half-angry voice. "We'll make out." He started over to join Ed. "Lola, you better see to this. We'll take just what we need tonight and I'll come back for the rest in the mornin'."

They began loading the wagon and shortly Mayne called, "Well, I'll be getting on in to town. Sure sorry about this, Gardner. Be sure to call on me for anything you need. And Hughes," he added, seeming to notice Ed for the first time. "You might ride home with Nan."

Ed was lifting a straw-filled mattress into the wagon. He finished throwing it in, then said, "That's what I'd planned on doin'."

Mayne turned to Nan. "Sure you won't let me drive you?"

"No," was her quick answer. "It's miles out of your way and it's late, nearly ten. You won't be there much before midnight as it is."

Mayne said his good-bys and Nan walked out as far as the fence with him and they stood there, the run of their voices sounding across to the others for a few minutes. Then Mayne drove away along the town road that footed the ridge and Nan came across to help finish loading the wagon.

They had made a bed for the children behind the seat and Nan climbed up and saw them in it, bundled them warmly in blankets. Sam went back to the barn for a length of rope and last of all tied the sewing-machine on, saying contritely and in a low voice to his wife, "I just plain forgot myself, Lola."

Ed heard her reply softly, "It was all right, Sam. It was me that forgot."

Finally they were ready to go. As Ed helped Lola Gardner up onto the seat he thought of something that made him say, "Hold on a minute."

He crossed the yard and stepped in over one smouldering log that marked the cabin's doorway. He kicked loose two slabs of rock that had formed part of the hearth and knelt a moment, pulling off a glove and feeling the rocks.

They were hot to the touch and he carried them out and wrapped them in a piece of burlap thrown aside near the wagon. "To keep you warm," he told Lola Gardner. She thanked him and lifted her feet and he thrust the bundle under them.

She immediately forgot Ed and turned to her husband. "It's nice, Sam. Put your feet over here."

He protested and she insisted and as they drove away they were still arguing it, with never a look back at the cabin. And Ed knew then that Sam and Lola Gardner, in accepting the hearthstones—a token of what they had lost tonight—were already forgetting their bitterness before an innate and deeply-rooted common-sense that would carry them through this crisis.

CHAPTER TWO

Two-Bit Cowpoke

HE AND Nan were silent for a time, listening to the slow-fading squeal of the wagon-rims against the snow, Ed's sober glance taking in the smouldering wreckage of the cabin and, strangely, seeing in the naked blackness of the still-standing chimney a stark and personal warning of what was to come.

He turned away finally and told her, "Time to go," and they walked to the gate where she had tied her black. As he helped her into the saddle, he said, "You could go over there and thaw out a little."

"No," she said, with a look toward the dying glow of the log-ends. "I'm not cold, Ed. But I'm miserable. This wouldn't have happened if there was any decency left in the people of this country."

He looked up at her, the run of his thoughts making him drawl in an edgy tone, "You want me to go see Pete Card?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way," she was quick to say. "But there has to be an end to this. Hasn't there? It can't just go on."

He had no answer for that and walked over through the snow to the bay, gathered the reins and swung up. The saddle was so cold that it sent a shock along his spine. He came over to the gate and she fell alongside and they went on up the road, shortly swinging away from the wagon-tracks that would take them the long way around.

Until they came to the stiff upgrade where the trail climbed the ridge they let the horses trot, feeling the needling of air against their faces but grateful for this movement that warmed them.

When the animals had slowed to a walk, Nan asked abruptly, "Why doesn't Ralph do something about this?"

He put down the first impulsive answer her query brought to mind. Instead he told her, "He said tonight he'd do something. Maybe he will."

"He didn't say he'd do something," Nan cut in. "He said he'd have to do something."

Ed nodded. "Maybe he thinks he already has. They say he's the one who had Tom Parrish write those editorials. They made it pretty plain that Pete Card was the one."

"But Ralph could do more, couldn't he?"

Ed laughed softly. This turn of talk had him on edge and he ran a hand in under the sheepskin after his tobacco, then abruptly decided to wait for a smoke. "A lot more," he agreed.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that I've been seeing a lot of Ralph," she said with surprising directness.

"Your privilege, Nan," he said.

"You don't like him, do you?"

He had known this girl four years, since first coming here. The school was only three miles below his place on the town road, which made her his closest neighbor, and last fall he had seen a lot of her through having had the contract to supply the school cordwood. Yet, feeling that he knew her well, he never ceased to be surprised at this directness in her; and he had found that she could read him thoroughly, as she was doing now.

"Never had a reason for stoppin' to figure just what I do think of Mayne," was his measured reply. "I'm new here. He's what Sam would call a Big Augur. Owns the bank and the biggest brand around here. I'm just another cowpoke tryin' to build a two-bit spread."

"You needn't hang your head because you're just getting a start."

"Was my head hangin'?" he asked flatly.

"But you don't like Ralph Mayne," she insisted, turning the conversation before it could stray too far from the point. "Few people do. I'd like to know why. I'm new here, too, Ed. Sometimes I think I've made a mistake in Ralph."

He mulled that over in his mind, knowing she would have an answer. He was thankful for the brief respite when they came to a stretch where the trail narrowed and he could drop back to let her take the lead. But where the trail broadened again she was waiting for him.

"Tell me," she said.

He drew a deep sigh. "For one thing, he has money. All he wants."

"But so does Mark Baker have money. And no enemies," she countered.

HE GROPED for a way of explaining, finally thought he had it. "Remember summer before last when Al Nesbitt's wife was so sick and had to go East to see

the doctors? Well, Mark paid for her ticket and footed the bills. Not many know that. He offered to do it after he'd heard that Al had gone to Mayne for a loan—and been turned down."

"But Ralph's generous with me," she said soberly. "Tonight he drove all the way from town to bring me some candy for the school party."

"Maybe he thinks you're a better investment than Al was," he told her. He was near the edge of real unaccountable anger now and added, "Another thing. He backed George Byson for sheriff. No one knows why, but he had him elected. Now that we need a good sheriff, we have the weakest one the county's ever seen."

"But wasn't Byson a partner of Ralph's father?"

"He was. Old man Mayne bought out Byson's share of the brand and Byson gambled and drank his money away. Ralph Mayne owed him nothing."

She shook her head. "I don't pretend to know the politics of this country, Ed. But Ralph must've had a reason."

"So it was thought. But it's never come to light."

They gained the ridge-crest and swung into the timber and now the footfalls of their horses were muffled by deeper snow. They rode silently for several minutes until Ed, thinking he had in some way offended her, said, "Don't take my word for all this, Nan. Maybe I'm just sore because things come to Mayne so easy. You, for instance."

The temptation to add that last had been too strong. Now, seeing her head tilt quickly around at him, he knew that he had made a mistake. When she spoke she was angry.

"You take a lot for granted, Ed Hughes."

"I take it back. Shouldn't have said it."

"It's what you're thinking, so you might as well say it."

She was silent a long moment, then went on, "He's considerate and kind and for a year now no other man has paid me the slightest attention. There are times when a person gets lonely, Ed."

"Sure. But no man wants a turn-down. If I asked you to next Saturday's dance, you'd be goin' with Mayne."

"I'm not going to the dance with Ralph Saturday. If you asked me, I'd go with you," she flared.

He was all at once weary of this pointless talk and regretting that he had let her crowd him into this show of his feelings. "This is no good," he said and reined on ahead.

They covered the last two miles to her cabin beside the school without once speaking. He had come aground before her gate and opened it before he again looked at her.

Moving past him and into the yard, she said, "Better come and have some coffee."

"Thanks, Nan. Another time. I'll get on and lay a fire in the bunkhouse. There's a few things to straighten around before Sam gets there."

He closed the gate and she put the black against it, waiting until he was again in the saddle before saying abruptly, "You were right, Ed."

"About what?"

"About Ralph."

There was nothing he could say. Yet it was awkward, leaving like this. And so he sat there waiting, confused and ill at ease.

It was then that she said, softly, "And Ed. If you'd ever like to ask me to a dance, please do it." She turned and put the black up the path toward the shed beyond the cabin.

He watched until the darkness hid her before turning up the road.

OVER the three remaining miles, he had this enigma of a new and unlooked-for side of Nan Soule to worry around in his mind. Her manner tonight left him dissatisfied. For in one respect he could read into it the hint of a promise that had its boundless meaning for him. Yet, looking back over the past half hour in a sober common sense way, he saw that he might have been any man so long as he proved a willing foil against which she could test her uncertainties. A woman in love was unaccountable and she was certainly in love with Ralph Mayne.

So he added tonight's fresh image of Nan Soule to the clearly remembered but older ones the past four years had given him of this wholly desirable girl. And now he put her from his mind. Or rather, trying to see the future on the basis of what had happened to Sam Gardner, he seasoned his hopes that had so stubbornly and without reason included her, seasoned them with the salt of bleak reality. And he knew that he could put aside these hopes so long as Pete Card was allowed to hold the whip hand over the little people of this range.

Pete Card. The son of a known rustler with a wily sense for never overplaying his hand. Brush ranch had its definite boundaries and the brand was in evidence at the stock-pens and holding corrals at shipping time. But what went on at Brush, high in these near hills toward which he now rode, was shrouded in mystery. There were stories of strangers who rode the high trails at night. And any man who lost beef was quick to blame it on Brush.

Now Ed built the smoke he had denied himself earlier, rolled it clumsily with fingers stiffened by the cold, his thoughts not straying from Pete Card.

He had seen the man rarely, and always in the company of at least two of his riders. Brush men went about armed openly in a country where good manners had long ago called on a man to wear his gun under his coat if he felt the need of carrying one at all. Card was a young, enigmatic and seldom-spoken man, respected only because of his guns and those he could hire. As Sam had pointed out earlier, not much was really known of the man's ability with a weapon.

It had been the luck of the homesteaders to choose Brush's out-of-the-way corner of the range on which to settle. This up-country lay close to Brush's fence. Pete Card was therefore the logical one to take action against the settlers if such action became necessary. But just why he was taking it was hard to see. For, as Sam Gardner had said, the homesteads represented ". . . just a few damned acres in all this hellish big land."

Between Brush and the farms lay Wheel, his own outfit. The answer was there, plain to see.

But I won't sit and wait for it like Sam did, he told himself, and he knew now that the decision had been slowly ripening over these long weeks, that tonight had only brought him to the point of making it definitely.

He was not afraid. For in deciding to make the first move, he had considered fear and ruled it out. He was a fair shot and he supposed he could draw and line and fire a Colt in average time. Maybe better than average, thanks to Hal Winters back home. Over the years he and Hal had worked together they'd worn hand-guns constantly while riding the brush, taking countless shots at jacks and crows and coyotes; and they'd brought home more than one turkey tied to the saddle.

Hal had fallen in love with his ability to use a gun. He'd drifted away for a time and then returned only to have the astute editor of the local paper shortly expose him as a wanted man. Hal had left that second time in a hurry. He was dead now, killed in a gunfight. There had been something cold and unfeeling about him toward the end. He'd been something like Pete Card.

The editor, he thought suddenly. Now he was remembering his mention of Tom Parrish earlier when he had been talking to Nan of Ralph Mayne.

"Parrish is fair and he might play along with me," he said aloud, voicing something that was a major point in his thoughts.

And now he had thought of a way he might possibly deal with Pete Card. Just possibly.

IT WAS three-thirty in the morning when Tom Parrish was dragged from the heavy sleep of the hard drinker into a half wakefulness. He became slowly aware of a sound, an insistent tapping on his window and mumbled an oath as he sat up in bed.

The cold cut into him like a knife as he called, "I hear, damn it!" and the tapping stopped.

Shivering, he reached over to the table and groped for the bottle, found it and took a long pull, hunching his thin shoulders against the jolt of the whiskey. His overcoat lay on a chair across the room. Without the whiskey, he couldn't have forced himself to walk over there and put it on as he did now.

He got the lamp going and, carrying it, went out through the kitchen and opened the back door.

He said sourly, "The peace and quiet of the small town," as he let Ed Hughes in and slammed the door.

Still trembling against the cold, he put the lamp on the bedroom table and crawled back under the covers, sitting there bundled in the overcoat and only then saying, "This had better be good, Hughes."

"It is," Ed answered, and told him of Sam Gardner being burned out.

Parrish listened with hard attention, color gradually washing the pastiness from his face as anger laid its strong hold on him. Once he said with rancour, "Mayne might have had the courtesy to bring me this story," but was quick to add, "Continue."

When Ed had finished, the editor sat there a long moment thinking.

Finally he started speaking, softly, acidly, "Samuel and Lola Gardner were gently wakened at nine last night by the warming crackle of a fire built for them by well-wishing neighbors as protection against the zero temperature. They leisurely rose and dressed and with their children snugly wrapped against the cold, went outside to see the fun, laughing and frolicking around the cheery blaze.

"When the fire was out they found that it had burned down their cabin. They thought this was a fine joke and laughed and laughed. Then they decided it would be nice to go and stay a while with a friend, one Edward Hughes, at Wheel Ranch. There they will have—"

"Save it for your editorial," Ed interrupted him.

He handed the tight-lipped Parrish a folded piece of paper, drawling, "Here's something else for this week's edition. If it won't mean tearin' things apart."

Parrish nodded towards the table and Ed saw what he meant and handed him his spectacles. The man's hawkish face was set in a scowl as he began reading. But then the scowl faded and all the muscles of his face went slack.

He looked sharply across at Ed. "You really mean I'm to print this?"

Ed nodded.

"But, damn it! You can't—"

Parrish went wordless suddenly, showing by a narrowing of his lids that only in this moment had he finally grasped a full significance of what he had read. He asked briefly, "Pete Card?" and had an answering nod from Ed. "But this isn't your affair," he protested.

"You're wrong, Parrish. I'm next in line, probably."

"A guess, pure and simple."

Ed shrugged. "Call it what you want," he said levelly. "But I came here and took a fancy to that layout. Started on a shoestring, put every cent to my name into it. Along with four years' work. Now I've paid off all I owe. It's mine. But it's smack up against Brush. I won't let anyone push me around the way they're pushin' Sam Gardner."

"You don't know that Card will lift a hand against you."

Impatience all at once sharpened the angles of Ed's lean face. He shifted his boots nervously, nodded down to the paper lying in Parrish's lap. "I'll pay you regular rates on it. Run it in the want ads if you care to. But I need your help, Parrish."

"That's not the point. I'll help you any way I can. And without charge. But this is dangerous. You can't back it up."

"My affair."

The sparseness of that answer, the sober look on Ed's face, brought a change in Parrish.

He looked away, saying irritably, "All right. But you'll have to wake Joe Mellen on your way down the street. Just tell him to get up here quick. That we've got to tear up the front page and reset it before press time." He looked at his watch, gave a start. "My God! It's nearly four. That gives us only three hours."

"You'll have to tell Mellen, Parrish," Ed said.

Anger momentarily touched the editor's face. But then he smiled, seeing what Ed meant. "So I will. I haven't seen you, have I?"

When Ed was gone, Parrish sat staring into the dark kitchen, serious before the sober run of his thought. Once he breathed, half aloud, "Just an ordinary two-bit cowpoke. The world is full of surprises."

He reached for the bottle again, took a long drink and dressed.

CHAPTER THREE

Satan's Sell-Out

THE day wore on slowly for Ed. He was up at dawn and helped Sam Gardner hitch the team and then watched the homesteader take the wagon down the road, headed for his place to bring back the rest of their belongings. He split some cordwood and, with little Charley's help, stacked it under the lean-to by the bunkhouse door.

At noon Lola Gardner brought an apple pie to the house to interrupt him as he was cleaning the cedar-handled .45. He hadn't been aware of hunger and hadn't thought about eating and she noticed that and over his protest cooked him a meal of steak, fried potatoes, pan bread and coffee. When he rose from the table his plate was clean and the pie was gone and he felt better for the full meal.

By two the sky had clouded over and at three, as he saddled the bay, a spitting of snow rode the fitful gusts. Half an hour later, as the storm boiled down out of the hills, he was passing the schoolhouse and riding in on Nan Soule's cabin beyond.

He left the bay on the sheltered side of the shed behind the cabin. Nan was waiting for him at the back door.

He said, "Not a nice day, is it?" but she had no reply, only eyeing him in a puzzled, questioning way.

Not until he was using the broom to sweep the snow from his boots did she ask quickly, "Is he tied back out of sight?"

"No. Just out of the wind."

"Hadn't you better put him inside?" she asked, adding hesitantly, "You're leaving, aren't you?"

"Leaving?"

"I guess you haven't seen it."

She turned and then went in through the kitchen into the living room. He followed as far as the kitchen and in another moment she was back again, handing him a copy of this week's *Clarion*.

She avoided his glance now, saying, "Down there in the right hand corner, Ed. Read it."

It was an item headed:

IN OUR MIDST

An interesting inquiry from a private source reached our editor's desk this week. It was postmarked Socorro and requested information on the whereabouts of one Hal Winters of that locality, describing Winters as being six feet tall, weighing around a hundred and eighty and having dark brown hair and brown eyes. Aliases used by Winters have been Al Weathers, Ben Jordan and Edward Hughes.

Winters is wanted specifically for the killing of Rice Henderson, notorious gunfighter and town marshal, and in connection with several other encounters that resulted in either the demise or crippling of his opponents.

In the interest of public enlightenment and in view of the laxity of recent law enforcement in this locality, this information is offered for what it may be worth to our readers.

Ed smiled meagerly, seeing that it was all

there. The original had been improved upon, smoothed out and made into a story.

His expression caused Nan to say in an aloof way, "You're amused?"

"I was only thinkin' that Tom Parrish did a good job with what I gave him."

He unbuckled his sheepskin and, letting it hang open, stepped over to the stove, serious once again. When he swung around he saw her eyes go to his waist, to the shell-filled belt there.

"Nothin' to get spooky over, Nan," he told her. "Just a try at something. And I'm not pullin' out."

His words puzzled her and now, momentarily losing that quiet and capable air that was the cloak of her profession, she at once became utterly feminine, looking at him in a way he had never seen before. It struck him then that her sureness most always made her seem older than she actually was, that in reality she was very young.

"Last night I went in and had a talk with Parrish," he told her. "We did some—"

He caught a sound at that moment, the muted rhythmic hoof-echo of horses coming along the road. He left the stove and went into the living room and looked out the curtained window.

Through the heavy fog of falling snow he saw Pete Card and Henry Wise and another Brush rider go past, heads down against the wind and horses at the trot.

Nan had come to stand close behind him and, unaware of her, he now swung abruptly about. His arm touched the yielding softness of her, startling him so that he reached out and put a steadying hold on her arm.

He quickly brought his hand away and stepped back. In this moment he was keenly aware of her full effect upon him.

HE SAID, a trifle gruffly, "I was about to ask if you'd seen anyone from Brush headed out from town. There goes my answer." He went back into the kitchen, buckling his coat, adding, "Keep the fingers crossed for me, Nan."

"That was Pete Card," she said from close behind him. "You're following him?"

He nodded, drawling, "Maybe he's takin' the bait." Hand on the door latch, he turned to face her.

"Bait?" she queried, then suddenly halfway understood what he had been trying to tell her. Fear widened her eyes and she breathed, "Ed, you can't!"

There was something in her eyes, in her voice, that roused in him now that same groundless hope her parting words last night had given him.

He said with a deliberate solemnity, "This is something of my own choosing, Nan. Don't

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WINCHESTER BATTERIES

Make night of the dark *bullet-fast*

try and stop me. But it'll help, knowin' you wanted to."

He wheeled out of the door then and ran across to the shed. As he swung up into the saddle and pulled the bay around, lifting him into a quick run, she called something that was lost against the rush of the wind. Going away, he had that clear picture of her, standing there tall and straight and with that serious set to her flawless features that was deep concern for him. Then the cabin's corner blocked her from his view.

He remembered the loop the road made around the mesa two miles below and now he swung left, intending to short-cut the Brush riders and hit the trail ahead of them. But he hadn't taken into account the blinding fall of snow. In five minutes, he was as good as lost. He angled farther to the left, back toward the road. And now he was using the spur.

Twenty minutes of this blind going brought him abruptly onto a trail. He turned down it and shortly knew that it led to Doug Neil's place and that he had wasted time, not saved any. Turning into the town road, he picked up the fresh tracks of the Brush riders lightly sifted with the new fall of snow. And now a wild, uncaring recklessness laid its hold on him and he knew that everything from here on depended on chance. He went on at a reaching trot.

That recklessness held his expression to a studied impassiveness when, making a bend lower along the road with the timber close on both sides, he saw a rider waiting at the margin of the trees.

It was Henry Wise, Brush's foreman, and as he approached the man put his horse out into the road.

Ed reined in a little short of Wise, drawling, "A hell of a day for a man to be on the move."

Wise nodded. "It is." He was middle-aged, dour, and his expression would have benefited a man holding four aces in a game of draw. "Goin' somewhere?"

"The usual," Ed told him. "Town. Why?"

"Seen the paper today?" The Brush man had now placed his horse so that his right side was away from Ed. His canvas windbreaker hung open and in the bite of this weather that also had its plain meaning.

Ed deliberately frowned, saying noncommittally, "What about the paper?"

After a long look and no further explanation, Wise called, "Okay, Pete," without taking his eyes from Ed.

Off to the right a branch snapped over the sighing of the wind, pulling Ed's attention that way to show him Pete Card and the third Brush man coming down out of the trees. As Card came up, Wise gave way and dropped back a little, buttoning the windbreaker.

This Pete Card was a young man of medium build, slight and with a thin clean-shaven face darkly patterned by the line of his beard. He had pale blue eyes that now took on an odd light of amusement, although he wasn't smiling. He spoke to Wise without looking at him, his glance holding to Ed.

"How about it, Henry?"

"Hasn't seen it," was Wise's reply.

For a moment Card's impassiveness held. Then he slowly smiled. "Got a few minutes to spare when you get to town?" he asked.

Ed shrugged. "Why not?"

"Then come along." Pete Card nodded down the trail, lifted rein and started away.

With a sure instinct Ed sensed that he had a part to play here, that one thing had to be decided now. The mood that had its hold on him made him play it rashly, taking a long chance.

He abruptly quarter-faced the bay around, so putting all three Brush men well to the front of him. And now his right hand came up and unbuckled the sheepskin. He pulled the glove from that hand, this move widening the look on Henry Wise's face and stiffening him in the saddle.

A moment later Pete Card sensed that Ed wasn't following. He stopped, bringing his horse partly around.

"Comin'?" he called. Then he took in his foreman's close attention and his glance swung back sharply to Ed.

"You're too sure of something, Card," Ed drawled flatly. "First you send this saddle bum out to stop me and ask some fool questions." His eyes shuttled to Henry Wise with a flat challenge and then, seeing the man's belligerence quickly fade, he went on, "Now you call a new turn. I'll damned well call my own! What's on your mind?"

THERE was a moment when Ed doubted that his bluff would carry. The flush of anger rode Card's face and his blue eyes narrowed.

But then some sense of caution in the man tempered his first impulse to violence and he brought his horse a few steps closer, saying without evasion, "We had you pegged wrong, Winters."

The expression on Ed's face remained impassive. "Go on."

"Now that we know who you are, we're cuttin' you in."

"On what?"

Card's shoulders lifted. "Who knows? There's got to be a change now, you turnin' out to be what you are."

"Where'd you hear all this?" Ed drawled.

"Read it in the paper."

Ed whistled softly, making a good pretense at surprise. "You did, now?" And he stopped

there, pretending to consider his own problem but in reality trying to see what lay behind Pete Card's words.

"Town's safe enough," Card offered. "You can forget George Byson."

"Who said I was thinkin' of Byson?"

Card took this without the slightest visible indication of offense. "We've bought him off," he added.

"We?" Ed asked.

But this was as far as Card would go, for his next words were, "We'll make you ten times as much as that two-bit spread of yours ever would. It'll take twenty minutes in town for you to get your answers, Winters. You won't regret it."

Ed said, "Fair enough." He glanced at the two others, curtly nodded to them, "Get goin'."

Henry Wise and the other man took that flat order without showing any resentment, starting down along the road. Ed now came up even with Pete Card and Brush's owner said, "Bein' careful's a habit of mine. No offense meant, the way Henry flagged you down."

Ed nodded, said nothing, and they went on at a reaching trot. The light was beginning to fade and the fall of snow was heavier now.

Presently, Pete Card said, "I hear you took Sam Gardner in."

Ed gave a mirthless laugh, saying almost savagely, "You're sure playin' a penny-ante game, Card. I don't want any part of it—if that's what's on your mind."

"It was bigger than a penny-ante game until you turned out to be Hal Winters."

"How come?"

"You wouldn't have lasted another six months," was Card's bland answer. "Neither would Olson or Jeffers or Stonebreak." These were neighbors of Ed's whose land flanked Brush's fence.

Here, then, was proof of Ed's hunch and he was wishing that Nan Soule and Tom Parrish could have heard it in Card's own words.

He had a moment of almost uncontrollable anger, knowing that he would probably never again have a better chance at the man. But Card had indicated that he wasn't alone in this and a sober reasoning told Ed that there was no point in having made a beginning only to see the thing halfway finished, whatever it would turn out to be.

They could see the town close below now, a dark blur against the snow with several lights winking feebly through the thickening gray pall of day's final hour. They rode the abrupt down-slope of the road and, abreast the first house, Pete Card called to the pair ahead, "Far as we go," turning in toward the house.

This was George Byson's place, a house of weathered, unpainted boards with a tarpaper roof. Over his surprise, Ed remembered to play out his part. He waited while the two Brush riders turned and came back and went on ahead of him, following Card. He came along close behind and at the rear of the house found Card out of the saddle and stamping the snow from his boots on the small unroofed back stoop.

Without ceremony, Pete Card opened the back door and entered and they heard him call sharply, "Byson!" He reappeared shortly and said, "Henry, go get him. Use the alley and be sure no one's with him. Tell him to bring his partner."

Henry Wise rode away and Card told Ed, "Better come in. There's a fire in the stove." He nodded to his remaining rider. "Sid, drift on down and get yourself a drink and wait for us. And I said one drink," he added with meaning.

HE HAD a lamp going in the middle room by the time Ed entered and was throwing wood into the stove. This was Byson's bedroom, untidy, the bed unmade and the window dirty.

Lowering the shade, Card said wryly, "George is at the red-eye again. Man lives like a dog when he's that way." He took out tobacco, shook out the dust for his smoke and offered the sack to Ed, who ignored him and instead reached for his own. Pete Card's jaw tightened at this insolence, but that was all.

Rolling his smoke, Ed knew that he had Card unsure of himself, bluffed. So now he drawled irritably, "You're wastin' my time, friend. I wouldn't touch a thing Byson had his hand in."

Brush's owner moved his arm in a careless way. "We can forget George after tonight."

"I don't like it," Ed said flatly. He took off the sheepskin, tossed it on the unmade bed, now keenly aware of the weight of the gun at his side.

"You'll like it when you hear what it is."

The minutes dragged on, Ed several times going to the window to draw the blind aside an inch or two and look out into the gathering darkness, giving every appearance of a man made nervous by unfamiliar surroundings.

Once Pete Card asked with a touch of awe, "Who was this Rice Henderson you tangled with?"

"He asked too many questions," was Ed's pointed answer. And from then on Card was silent.

Better than fifteen minutes later the front

ARE YOU BUYING BONDS?

door slammed. Ed said, "Stay set, Card," and eased into the shadow of the back hallway, leaving Card alone in the room.

It was from there that he saw the far door open and Ralph Mayne step through it, followed by the sheriff.

He had but a brief moment to take this in, to realize the enormity of Ralph Mayne's deception, before Mayne asked sharply, "Where is he?"

Pete Card nodded to the back hallway and Ed, schooling his expression to hide the anger suddenly boiling in him, stepped into sight and took a stance in the doorway, idly leaning against the frame.

Mayne's glance came hard on him, intent, wary. This big man whom Nan Soule favored was at this moment as close to uncertainty as Ed had ever seen him. Ordinarily as unruffled in manner as he was correct in his dress, he now showed a strange irritation.

Without taking his eyes from Ed, he said crisply, "Pete, take George and get into the front room."

"But Ralph, I—" That was as far as Card got before Mayne's glance came around to him.

That glance told Ed something; that Pete Card was afraid of Mayne in more than a physical way, for Card stood there with a gun at his hip and took this and moved immediately toward the door.

George Byson said, "We'll be handy if you need us, Ralph."

The door slammed behind them and Mayne was once more looking at Ed. But now a smile slowly eased his expression and he said, "What's come over Pete? You've got him buffaloed, Hughes."

Ed had nothing to say to that. But he had noticed one thing more about Mayne, a thing as much a part of the man as the clothes he wore. Mayne's nicely-pressed gray suitcoat bulged at the left side. He was wearing a shoulder-holster, a habit he had fallen into years ago when, sent away by his father to build a stake, he had become peace officer in a small town and earned himself a creditable reputation. No one around this town had ever seen Ralph Mayne without that bulge to his coat.

"How much did he tell you?" Mayne asked.

"Enough."

Mayne laughed softly then and with his left hand reached to a vest pocket and took out two cigars. He offered one to Ed, lifted his brows when it was refused and returned it to the pocket. He bit off the end of the other, lit it.

Looking down at the cigar, he drawled, "So you know. What do you think of it?"

Ed elbowed out from the door-frame, standing now with his right side clear. He stretched a point in saying, "Card claims I was next on your list. What would that get you? Your outfit's more'n ten miles this way from mine."

"So you did get him to talking?" Mayne seemed slighly surprised even now. His manner was smooth, unruffled as always. Ed could see that he was a man who could impress a woman, and in that moment he forgave Nan Soule for not being able to see beneath this suave cloak.

Mayne went on, "Pete's a funny one. All show and not much to back it up. He's afraid of me and never once have I reached in under my coat."

"What would pushin' me and Olson and Stonebreak out of the way get you?" Ed asked. "More graze? Hell, you've got enough for one man now. I told Pete this looked like a penny-ante game. It still does."

Mayne smiled. "For one thing, I've owned Brush ranch for two years. Pete Card doesn't lift a hand unless I tell him to."

Ed was strangely unsurprised at this. "Brush never counted for much. You're still talkin' small, Mayne."

"There's more to it," Mayne said. He paused a moment, drawing on the cigar.

Then he went on blandly, "This is the back door to a big country. You could move a lot of cattle out through it if you were smart."

In these few words lay the complete answer, carrying a potent meaning; and at once Ed saw the man's limitless ambition and the end that, according to Mayne's viewpoint, made it all worth while.

He said, remembering the part he was playing, "Now you're makin' more sense. Card says you can use me. How?"

Mayne laughed softly and his look was full on Ed, a mocking look that had no sure meaning.

Then he was saying, "Tom Parrish is a trustin' soul. Ten minutes after we unlocked the door to the bank this mornin', he was in tellin' me about this little joke of yours."

His words had the effect of a blow suddenly and surely knocking the props from under Ed's one advantage. And now all semblance of amusement had left Mayne's face. His eyes, cold and hard, were on Ed.

He must have read Ed's thoughts, for all at once he threw the cigar to the floor stooped slightly, and his right hand slashed up and under his coat.

ED HAD his split-second's warning and moved. The long-forgotten timing came back as his hand lifted, palming out the Colt's. The feel in his wrist was right as he lined the heavy piece, thumbing back the hammer. He squeezed the trigger, at the same time wheeling back and out of line at sight of Mayne's short-barreled .38 arching down.

The deafening double explosion seemed to pound Mayne's wide chest backward. The

breath of his bullet stirred Ed's left sleeve. And the beginning of a smile touched Ed's face as he stepped out once more, gun ready.

But Mayne was staring at the floor with a glazed look and his gun, following the direction of that stare, exploded once more with its tongue of rosy flame slanted at the bare boards. A white gouge appeared on the floor and the glancing bullet loosed plaster from the wall beyond. A chunk of plaster fell with a slurring sound as Mayne's knees buckled and he went down. He didn't straighten from that doubled up position and Ed knew he was dead even before he stepped over and looked down at him.

The door at the front of the room opened and George Byson stood there, jaw sagging open and his eyes coming wide in a stupid unbelieving stare at what he saw.

The sheriff said hollowly, "My God! Is he dead?" and Ed answered soberly, "He is."

The slur of boots came from the room beyond the sheriff and shortly a blast of cold air stirred through the doorway. Knowing that Pete Card was on his way out, Ed stood there, making no move to follow.

Then the sudden muffled footfalls of a horse sounded from out back and Ed had a thought that put a thin smile on his face and made him drawl, "Not even a so-long. Card must have had his ear glued to that door."

George Byson nodded soberly. His look was abject as it met Ed's, then dropped away again. Then Byson did a strange thing. Reaching up, he drew his coat aside and unpinned the nickled star from his vest.

He said, "This was wrong from the start, Hughes." He tossed the badge of his office to the table and, turning to leave, added, "I'm going to buy a bottle, unless you've got some objection." He waited, caught Ed's shake of the head, went on, "If it gives me the guts, I'm ridin' out and puttin' the match to Brush. This is the last you'll see of me." He went out of the door.

But halfway across the far room, almost beyond Ed's view, he turned and came back again.

"Forgot to tell you, Hughes," he said. "Nan Soule rode up as Ralph and I was leavin' the office. That mare of hers looked like she'd given her a run. She asked Ralph if he'd seen you. He told her he hadn't."

A hope that had died in Ed last night stirred to life.

"Don't you want to know what she said next?" Byson asked.

"What was it?"

"That she had to find you. That if he saw you he was to say she would be waitin' in the hotel lobby."

The sheriff looked down at the figure on the floor. "I reckon Ralph didn't mention it. He was inclined to be jealous of any other man when it came to that girl. She knew it, too. But down there a while ago she didn't seem to give a damn."

The slamming of the front door as the sheriff left turned Ed's thoughts from what this room had held for him, from the violence and the edge of fear he had so closely approached.

Leaving the place, climbing onto the bay and heading down the street in the darkness, he was wondering what he could say to Nan.

In the end he decided that the matter would probably take care of itself.

DARE-DEVIL ACES

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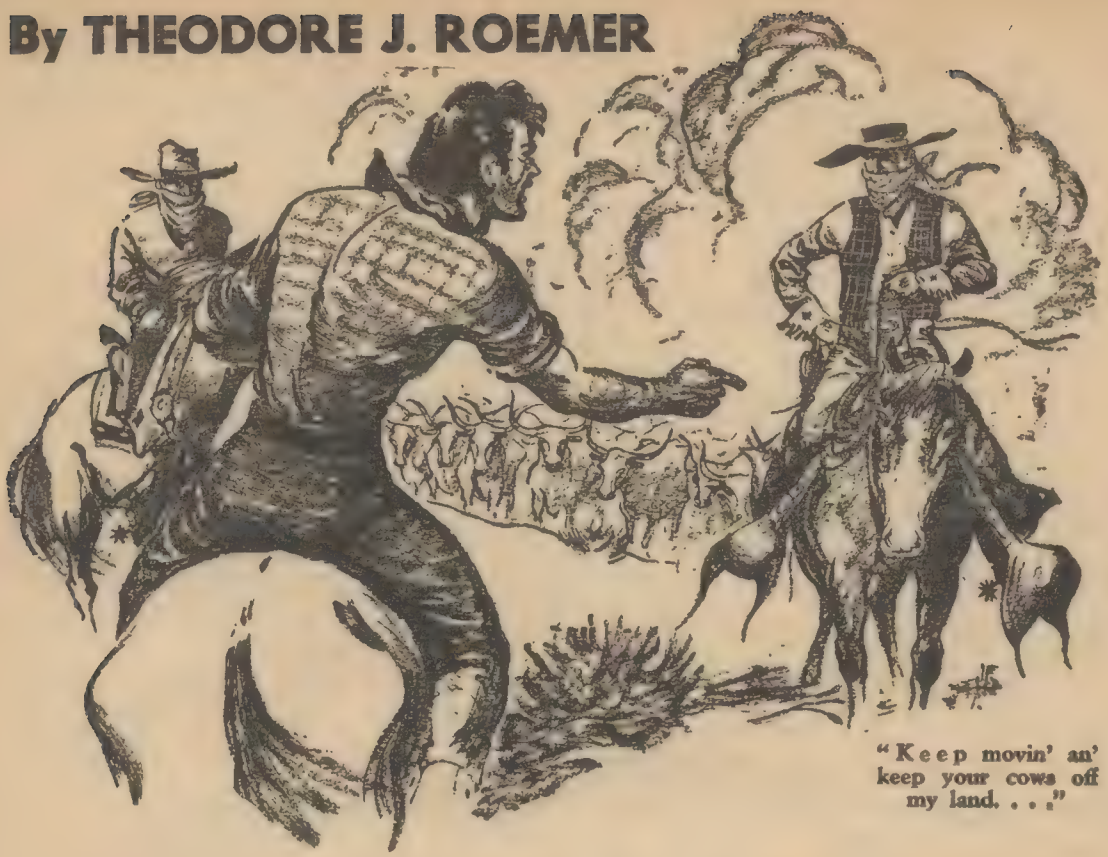


"Keep movin' an' keep your cows off my land. . . ."

DARK AND BLOODY GROUND

It was a grave Tim Mullen was digging, a grave for his hopes and dreams and his future—but to fit them in he had to dig clean down to Paradise!

HE GOT up from the silence of the supper table and walked to the door. He leaned against it, and the sod roots growing around the wooden frame scraped the burn through the tear in his shirt.

But he didn't feel the hurt. What hurt was what Mary had just told him.

He looked out over the Kansas prairie, sere and rolling. She had lost faith in him.

The burn in his shoulder crept into his heart and he stood there for long minutes while Mary's silence continued behind him, broken only by the whimper of little Timmy in his straw cradle. He thought back about the three years he had put in on this grass land. He looked at his small herd down at the drying, mucky buffalo wallow. He thought, *If they'd had water in these dry years it would have been all right, but when you don't have water. . . .*

Mary's voice came behind him, tightly, "If you don't want to sell any cattle you could sell that new-fangled windmill you bought of Larry James, and never set up, waiting to find water in that hole you're digging. Then we'd have money at least to buy wood. Timmy and I can't stand another winter like last."

He fixed his eyes on the horizon and wondered distantly if man were meant to inhabit these bleak plains. Once he'd dreamed big

things for this country. He'd fought to make his claim in it and build this house and break the sod. All this as a single man, and then he had courted Mary, a school teacher, at Kiowa and had won her over a dozen other suitors. Irish Tim Mullen. And he'd brought Mary to his quarter-section, bursting with dreams and faith.

It was free land. He'd bought stock, the windmill. He planned to preempt the quarter south of his, paying the $1.25 per acre of it, and then take a free claim on the eastward one hundred and sixty. A man could get a tree claim by planting five acres and caring for them five years, then proving up. This would give him three quarter sections of land. Three quarter sections!

Timmy behind him began to cry. He heard Mary rise and pick the baby up. She began to croon. He heard the break in the song, however, and Tim Mullen's throat was thick.

AND then he saw the golden cloud toward the southwest. It rose slowly like a giant canvas against the low sun, diffusing the prairie light, multiplying it, flaunting streamers to incredible heights into the white clouds that never gave rain. And instantly he knew what it was. A late Texas trail herd headed for Wichita or Newton. He lifted his shoulder from the door frame and started for the horse corral, moving swiftly.

He didn't take time to throw a saddle on his gaunt bay, but flung a bridle on the animal, swung a leg over and jogged hurriedly toward the approaching cloud. He didn't want those Texas cattle to bed down around his wallow! He didn't even want them to cross his land!

But as he topped the first rise, the urgency suddenly went out of him. *Mary,* he thought. She wouldn't want him to turn aside this herd. Texas herds meant trail cripples, which often were given away. They often meant more—warmth for winter, food.

But Tim had learned things working as a cowman before he'd turned homesteader, and one of them was that trail cattle also sometimes brought a fever to domestic cows. It was called Texas fever and home cows often got it if a trail herd merely traversed a pasture.

Tim had wanted none of this for his herd. That summer he had refused three other trail drivers permission to bed down around his wallow, and they had pushed on to Gus Voller's place, which had the only water buffalo wallow for miles around.

Mary had berated him for his foolish fears. "Texas fever!" she had exclaimed. "Something you heard of, you say. I say you dreamed of it, Tim Mullen. No one in these parts is silly enough to turn ten or twenty dollars away from their door. Texas fever!"

But Tim was obdurate. He had worked hard to bring his small herd up to present size. Next spring the three Holsteins would calf, then that shorthorn and the two brindles—no, he couldn't afford to let his cows sicken and die now. Not at this stage of his struggle.

But—and he suddenly thought—could he?

He walked the horse slowly through the vale near the wallow where he had been digging the windmill well. He was digging it laboriously by hand, and he looked now with a grimace at the dry hole. Another of his failures.

Maybe he should let this herd in. They'd finish the buffalo wallow, maybe, but somehow it always seemed to come back. The cowboys would cut out his cattle in the morning and go on and he was sure he'd have a couple of veals, maybe a cripple or two. Enough to buy some ricks of wood at the river bottoms at Kiowa. Mary would stay then for sure. He rode on slowly.

Even in the prairie wind the horse sweated between his legs. The coarse, patched denims chafed his thighs, and the wind whipped the ragged tear against the shoulder burn. Kansas land. He felt bitter. He rode toward the point rider this side of the herd.

The Texan saw him and shouted, but above the drag's thunder Tim didn't understand. But he saw the man looking past him at the buffalo wallow and knew what he meant. Tim halted the bay and the cowboy rode to him and stopped, dusty, slouched, saddle-weary.

"That your wallow?"

Tim nodded. "You ram-rodding this outfit?"

"No. That slim gent's the boss. Hey, Spike!"

The tall, hard-faced man already was gigging his tired mount toward them and Tim saw the herd piling up behind, lowing, restless, thirsting for water and the night stop. Tim looked at the gaunt longhorns and the struggle was still going on within him whether to let this mangy bunch in.

The trail boss said, "Willin' tuh let us bed down at your waterhole tonight?"

Tim said slowly, "What's the deal?"

"All the calves dropped."

"Any trail cripples?"

The trail boss looked at him sharply. "You fellows are getting greedier every time."

"There's reasons," Tim said shortly.

"All right, soddie. I'll throw in a couple. We were going to push on to Voller's but—"

The "soddie" did it. Tim's Irish had suddenly entered into the decision. He passed a calloused hand slowly over his tightened jaw and said,

"I reckon, stranger, that's where you're headed for then."

"You mean you ain't takin' that up?" the man exclaimed.

"That's right. Keep on movin' and keep your cows off my quarter section."

There was silence, then the first rider burst out with a guffaw. "Your quarter section! Hell, farmer, we don't want to take your land along with us. We got thousands of acres better'n this back home. It's just the water we're after, not your damned sod."

Tim caught the derision. His Irish leaped, suddenly full-blown. He said, "Take your mangy, ticked cattle to hell an' gone! Just keep 'em off my place!" He yanked the gaunt bay and the animal, surprised, turned and broke into a rocky gallop.

TIM rode past the dry hole and skirted the wallow. He was still angry but now his thoughts were catching up to him. At the pole corral he pulled off the bridle and slapped the winded bay into the pasture. He didn't want to go into the house but there was nothing else to do. He had to face Mary sooner or later.

She met him at the door. She said. "You told them to ride on." It was no question. It was a cold statement of fact.

He said, "Yes."

She turned back into the cabin and said no more.

The next morning the trail herd was gone. Tim could see clear across to Gus Voller's place again. He saw Voller at his corral. The man was looking into it and Tim knew he was watching calves, or probably appraising the worth of broken trail critters the ramrod of the outfit had given him.

Tim washed in the warm wallow-water he'd scooped from the rain barrel, which he had dragged with horse and stone boat into the lee of the cabin. The water held a stench and was alive with wrigglers. He grimaced, dried his face and entered the cabin for breakfast, not looking again toward Voller's. He had seen Mary watching him.

She said nothing during the breakfast and that hurt all the more. Voller had been one of her suitors at Kiowa. Tim ate his oatmeal in silence and went out.

He looked over his quarter section. There was nothing he could do on the crops. But there was the well. He walked slowly to it.

All morning he dug in the dry hole and when the sun stood straight overhead, he walked back across the prairie for dinner. After dinner he was starting toward the well again when he saw Willie Mangan come across the prairie headed for Kiowa. He had an empty gunny sack for groceries.

Willie Mangan was homesteading a dry level stretch the other side of Voller's. He sometimes helped Voller with his work. He was a slight, wispy man and Voller called him half-cracked.

Willie said, "Know what that lucky Voller got last night?"

Tim wished they were farther from the cabin. He knew Mary could hear them. "No," he growled and lengthened his steps to get farther away.

But with that Willie raised his squeaky voice. "Five calves! Can you imagine that! And a spavined bull that'll come out all right after a month's rest. Can you imagine that?"

Tim wet his lips. "Yeah?" It was all he could say.

Willie kept on talking. "Voller's got a real herd now. Bought them good cows at Wichita. Borrowed money but they're good stuff. If he had your wallow—"

"My herd needs all the water I got," Tim said curtly.

"I mean, if you ever want to sell."

"Did Voller suggest that?" Tim had spun.

The other saw the Irish glint. He swallowed. "Uh—yeah—I mean, I dunno." Then he saw the well hole and changed the conversation quickly. "Say, you ain't still diggin' at that fool hole?"

"I am," Tim said.

The other broke into a cackling laugh. "I allus thought you were one of the smart men of these parts, Tim Mullen, but when you looked at your wallow, then said there was water right there and began digging, I begin to know different. Now I know you're crazy. Only Gawd gives water to this damned sod and He gives it from above." He cackled again and swung on across the prairie for town, chuckling.

Tim looked after him, then glanced at the house. Mary was in the doorway. Deliberately he took up the spade and bucket and walked to the dry well hole. His jaw was hard.

He had the windlass rigged so he could let himself down, then haul up buckets of dirt and dump them to one side all by himself, the bucket swinging back down the hole empty. He worked hard all afternoon and got down another eight feet.

The baby took a sick spell that night. Tim got up and offered to rock it, but Mary held it to her and Tim went back to the bed. He sat on the edge of it. He watched Mary in the yellow light of the turned-down kerosene lamp. Her eyes looked softer in the darkness; they looked even wet as she looked at the baby in her arms. He loved Mary. And he knew she loved him also, if only—

Willie Mangan's words came back to him. *If you ever want to sell.* . . . He closed his eyes. He didn't hate Gus Voller, but when a man seems to strike everything lucky—and the girl he had married might be thinking she

should have married that man—he stopped.

He said again, "I'll hold him a while, Mary."

She shook her head and Tim looked down at his horny, calloused hands, then lay down in the bed. But he didn't go to sleep.

THE next morning the baby was a little better. Tim went out to the hole in the prairie. He'd done a lot of thinking last night. He watched for Willie Mangan coming back from Kiowa.

Every half hour he crawled up the windlass rope and stared over the brown prairie. Then about ten o'clock he saw him, humping along under a bulging gunnysack. Voller's, Tim knew. He crawled out of the hole and over the sand and blue silt heaps and walked to intercept the man. They met at the corral.

"Hello, Willie."

Willie cackled. "Still at that crazy hole?"

Tim ignored the laugh. "You said yesterday that Voller will buy my wallow. Tell him I won't sell my wallow but I will sell the windmill that Larry James saved for me last spring; it was the only one Larry got all year. You can't buy them any more and they're going up in price."

The other's weak eyes watered with suspicion. He knew how Tim had scraped and saved to buy that windmill. And what it meant to him. And if he got water with that mill he could make his quarter section a paradise.

He said with caution, as if he were the buyer, "How much?"

"Same price I paid for it."

Willie blinked. "You mean it?"

"Sure do," Tim said sharply.

He turned and walked angrily away. He passed the windmill, still in the packing cases beside the barn, and headed back to the well. Parting with it would put him back years, but it wasn't like losing his herd, or his wallow or—or Mary. He dug furiously, blindly, at the dry well bottom.

At dinner time the baby was worse. Tim couldn't eat. He thought Mary's eyes were on him continually. Finally he looked over his cup which contained ground barley coffee and said, trying to make his voice casual.

"I suppose there are doctors back in Iowa where your folks live?"

She looked at him searchingly for a long time, then nodded and went on rocking the infant. Tim wondered if there were bitterness in her eyes, or what it was. One of the bays down in the corral kicked and the sound came to him on the wind as clearly as if it had happened outside the open door of the soddie. One could hear men talking if they'd been there.

Then the way the sound had carried gave him the swift thought *maybe rain* but when he looked at the sky it was blue and hot, and the eternal wind came over the seared grasses. And he knew there would be no rain.

He arose. He thought it would be nice to say something tender to Mary rocking Timmy, but he couldn't think of anything and he felt awkward. She glanced up at him. He went swiftly outside.

The wind blew and blew. It rocked the bucket as it hit the top of the spillway. It flung sand back into the deep hole. Tim swore as it scratched down his burned back. He sweated out of that wind but kept up a stolid digging. It was for nothing, he knew, but there wasn't anything else to do on the blasted quarter section and he'd go as crazy as Willie Mangan if he stayed around the house where Mary was silent and the baby cried.

Mary's silence hurt. The baby's crying hurt. The look of the burned quarter section of land with its wilted, scratched-in crops hurt. Everything in this damned wind-blown land hurt. He kept on digging.

When it had grown shadowy in the deep hole, he slammed the shovel down with the weary movement of another day lost, and, knotting the windlass rope, he climbed hand over hand to the top.

The wind struck his sweaty clothes and his damp hair. Even his shoes he noted were damp from dripping perspiration. But in a moment he was dry. He smiled bitterly at the wind. "The only damn thing you're good for," he muttered. He plodded to his sod hut.

Mary came out with the tin pail and dipped a bucket of the tepid wallow water from the rain barrel. She had on her sun bonnet and he knew she had been in the garden hoeing the pitiful remains of their beans and potatoes. The fact somehow gave him strength. It meant not only that the baby was better—she would not have left him if he weren't—but the thought that stirred him was that she hadn't quite yet given up. She had tried to go on a little way more.

He went into the house and looked into the crib. His son was sleeping. He breathed a little better and went to the wash bench outside and scrubbed the grime of the afternoon's work from his arms and bristly face. Mary passed him and didn't say anything, the red, bleached bonnet hanging by its strap on her shoulders. And he didn't blame her for not speaking and smiling. Things had mounted too great for her small shoulders. And she had lost faith in him. He hardly believed in himself any longer. He dried his arms and went inside.

As he sat down to eat he wanted to ask her if Gus Voller had brought over the sixty-eight dollars for the windmill, but he knew Voller hadn't—she would have told him before—and he ate his fried corn mush and

drank the sour barley coffee in silence. He thought, *She doesn't know anything about that windmill. It's just as well.*

The baby sucked hungrily at the bottle and Mary held it close.

He ran his fingers clumsily through his thick hair and stared into the night. *When a woman loses faith in her man. . . .* His throat thickened. *Quarter section, wind, dry prairie hole. . . . The quarrel with the Texan men, Voller's luck, Mary. . . .*

HE ROSE and went outside. The prairie was limpid with blackness, the stars as if washed by an April rain. The wind was so soft to his cheek that it breathed promises of moist earth and green grass and things that he had wished for when he'd first come, but which, Tim knew now bitterly, never came.

His thoughts choked him, and then he heard the cattle moving out on the prairie and the sound came from the dump hole he'd made. The thought came swiftly to him that one of them might stumble into the damned thing and he moved off into the night to chase them back.

But as he approached the vale he heard a halloa and he recognized Willie Mangan's voice. He answered it.

They met and Tim saw Willie had been running. He was out of breath.

"Why the running, Willie?"

"Tim! Voller wants to see you. Right away!"

"What's the matter?"

"His cattle," Willie gasped. "They're bawling and gasping and batting into the corral. Then they stand spraddle-legged an' shivering. They're loco and they're dying! It just came on tonight."

Tim stiffened. Voller's cattle sick?

Mangan grasped his arm. "Voller told me to run and get you."

"Me?" Tim exclaimed. "Why me?"

"You always talked about that Texas fever. It's what they got, and you seem to know something about it. Voller figures—well, he thinks you're smart an' can help him."

"Smart?" Tim stood still. Voller said that. The man who had been luckier than he in everything save winning Mary. Gus Voller believed in him. But Gus hadn't taken his advice before, and now all his domestic cattle —the stock he'd mortgaged his farm to buy— were going.

Tim shook his head slowly. "I don't know what I can do, but you tell him I'll be over, Willie. All I know is that cattle get it if they as much walk over the trail of one of those longhorn herds. I think it might be caused by something the longhorns drop, maybe ticks that fall off the Texas critters as they pass through, but as for a cure—" he shook his head—"I gave Gus my advice two years ago and that was to steer clear of trail herds."

Suddenly he realized his own cows were moving around suspiciously. It was strange compared to their lethargy of the past weeks of hot weather, and fear seized his heart that they unaccountably had contracted the killing fever. He started running forward, when he grew still after taking one step. His eyes shot down.

He looked down at his feet. His feet were cool; his feet were—he took another step and heard the squishing, soft splash. His throat hurt then. He knew! He was walking in water!

Willie Mangan noticed it at the same time. "What the heck?" Willie bent down. Tim did so also. They felt and Tim realized it was water all right. It was coming, seeping down the vale from the well hole!

Tim hunkered there. The cows were wallowing in its cool sweetness. Willie was muttering in that crazy cracked voice of his, "Tim, it's a running vein. Tim, you smart devil. You struck a vein—"

But Tim Mullen just hunkered there and the cool water seeped into the cracks of his great hands and its sensation crawled up into his arms and his shoulders and into his heart until his chest swelled with pain.

He thought back of his logic of how that buffalo wallow always stayed moist even in the longest, hottest spells. He thought of his reasons for turning away those Texas herds and of the news Willie had brought tonight of Voller's herd. He thought of his thirsty, waiting land, the quarter section, the other sections, his dreams. . . .

There was a movement in the night behind him. For an instant he thought it was one of the cows momentarily strayed from the pleasure of the new water, then suddenly he knew it wasn't. He turned swiftly. Mary's figure was shadowy. He saw the open cabin door behind her, the yellow kerosene lamp, he heard the stillness. The baby was sleeping. She came down toward them. She had heard—

He didn't have to open his arms. She was there, in them, of her own volition, and her fingers were tight on his shirt front. She was pressing the rough cloth against her mouth, trying to hold back the sobs.

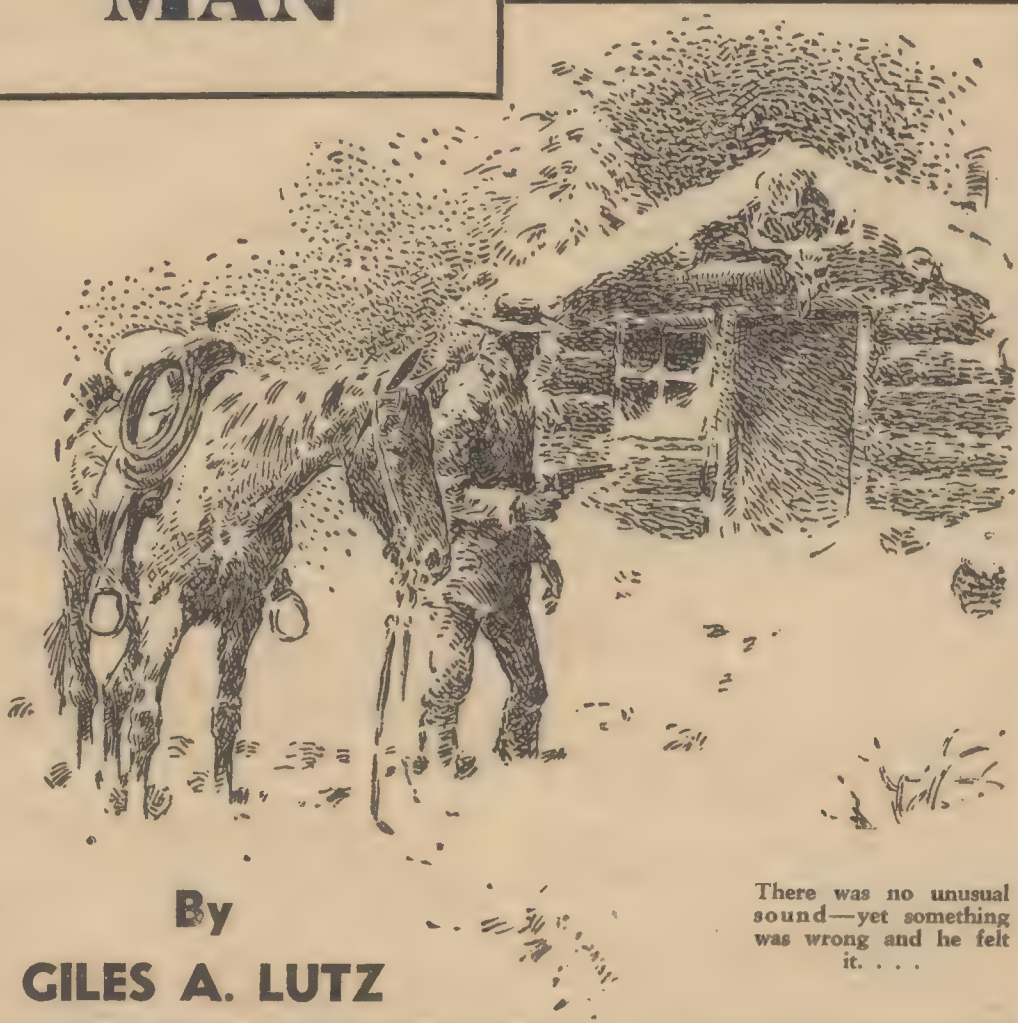
He felt her small body shaking. And the stricture of his throat the past two days was suddenly gone. He put his arms around her.

"Mary," he said, "Mary, look up at me."

He reached down and tilted her chin, then the Irish came out in him. He chuckled. "It's all right, Mary. How can a lass have faith in her husband when the scalawag was almost adoubtin' himself." He laughed aloud and raised her to his height and kissed her soundly.

TROUBLE MAN

A man who lives by his guns will sometimes find he's carrying at least one bullet—with his own name on it!



There was no unusual sound—yet something was wrong and he felt it. . . .

By

GILES A. LUTZ

ED THURSTON walked heavily up the main street of Lone Tree. DePalma and his Big Horse crew were broken, fleeing, but Thurston felt no sense of triumph, only a desperate feeling of weariness.

The cold November rain started again, pocking the mud with miniature craters. He wouldn't be surprised if this wasn't the forerunner of snow, and he was glad there was no riding to be done tonight. He passed Barstow and Stout, two of the small ranchers who had ridden with him against DePalma, and their faces were loose and alight with joy.

"It's done, Ed!" they yelled. "How about a drink on it?"

"It's done," he agreed solemnly. "I'll take the drink later."

He watched them go down the street and wished he could experience their feelings. But they had only been in the fight, not started it, and that made the difference.

He passed Mrs. Abel, and she dropped her eyes and hurried past, not speaking. Abel had been in the fight, and he wouldn't come back. Mrs. Abel would have a different feeling towards Thurston than Barstow and Stout.

He climbed the steps to the porch of Lone Tree's hotel, and Matt Brady watched him from the doorway, his eyes steady and expressionless.

The blankness of his gaze irritated Thurston. "It's done, and a good thing for the valley."

Brady nodded slowly. "You proved that all the lawlessness in this county started on DePalma's Big Horse ranch—that Pullman, the sheriff, was in with him. You saw it first, and I'm giving you credit. Maybe it's your reason for starting it I don't like."

Thurston scowled and built himself a cigarette. He was a tall man, a little stooped with weariness and hard work. His face was thin and lined with a tiredness beyond his years. His eyes were a tawny color, dull now that the fight was over. His left hand was bandaged, and he wore a small bandage on his cheek.

Matt Brady thought, he had the luck of the rash. He was in the thick of it and came out with a few nicks.

"You should have made sure of DePalma," Brady murmured.

ANGER crossed Thurston's face at the odd note in Brady's voice. "I tried hard enough," he said simply. He was silent, thinking over the past month. The actual fight had been short enough. A small rancher himself, he had molded the small ranchers into a compact, powerful band. He had patiently gathered and laid the proof of DePalma's depredations against the valley before them, and they had reacted swiftly and violently. Last night's fight at DePalma's ranch house had been the end of it. DePalma, Meade, his foreman, and Sheriff Pullman had pulled out fast at the end. Thurston didn't think the valley would see those three again.

His anger rose uncontrolled at Brady's manner. "DePalma and his crew were good customers at your hotel, Matt. Are you sorry they're gone?"

Brady's eyes didn't waver. "I'm forgetting you said that."

Thurston said quickly, "I'm recalling it, Matt." Only anger had prompted the words. Brady had no stain on his name. He was a small, gray man with many years of living stamped into his face. He owned Lone Tree's hotel and made a fair living for himself and his two daughters. Thurston knew that only age had kept Brady out of the actual fighting. But he had come here tonight expecting a small degree of approval, and Brady met him with this fixed coldness.

"What are you holding against me, Matt?" he asked bluntly.

"You're the kind of a man trouble follows," Brady said slowly. "Soon after you bought your ranch here two years ago I knew someone was going to be hurt. I'm still resenting that."

Thurston walked past him into the hotel lobby. He did not attempt to answer Brady—he did not understand his talk. Brady couldn't mean he resented DePalma's getting hurt, but it sounded that way.

Thurston saw Kate Brady at the desk and turned her way. She looked up, and there was no welcome in her eyes. He noticed the thin, white set of her mouth and thought, *She has never approved of me.* Somehow it gave him an odd feeling of discomfort.

She was like her father, on the small side, but the proud carriage of her head and shoulders gave an impression of greater height. Her eyes had an unusual depth that Thurston could not probe. The thought occurred to him that she was good to look at, and a half smile crossed his face.

She said, "You accomplished what you started after," and his smile died at the censure in her tone.

"You think I fought DePalma because of Julia?"

"Didn't you?" Her eyes had the directness of her father's.

"DePalma's liking for Julia had nothing to do with it," he said stiffly. He had analyzed his feelings carefully and knew that had not been his motivation. He knew some people wouldn't believe it, but he couldn't help that.

"The valley's free for the first time in a long while. The small ranchers can move without DePalma's shadow over them. Isn't that worth all of the fighting?"

Her face softened. "I want to believe that was your only reason for leading them, Ed. But if it was to get Julia, you will be—" She broke off abruptly, and the hard set came back into her face. "There's Julia now."

Thurston turned eagerly. Julia was coming down the stairs and her dark, radiant beauty was something tangible, filling the room. She walked over to Thurston and placed a hand on his arm.

He frowned at the carelessness of the gesture. She was as hard to hold as a wisp of smoke. Her face was tired, and there were shadows under her eyes. He wanted to believe it was worry over him and was angry at the doubt that sprang to life within him.

They are not like half sisters, he thought. Compared to Julia, Kate was the flicker of candle light against a roaring fire. Matt Brady had been married twice, and it was odd his two daughters were so far apart. The difference had to lie in their mothers.

"You won," Julia said, and her tone was oddly flat. "DePalma's running."

Thurston forgot Kate. "You're not sorry?" he asked eagerly.

She shook her head, a light, fleeting gesture. "You're still here, aren't you?"

The words were what he wanted to hear, but the tone left him lacking in satisfaction. He reached for her hand. "Have dinner with me, Julia."

He could not read the flicker of emotion in her eyes, and it left him troubled.

"Not tonight. I'll see you later, Ed." She went out of the door hurriedly as though relieved to escape.

He turned to Kate, and the knowledge that she had seen and heard flushed his face. "If Julia had never been here, I would have still made my fight against DePalma." Somehow it was important he make her believe that.

She started to say something, then held it. Her eyes rested on his face a long moment. "I wish you could have made sure of DePalma. Watch yourself, Ed."

He went out of the door, feeling a curious wonder at her words. That was almost what Brady had said. He could not understand either one of them and gave it up.

THE rain had turned into big, wet flakes of snow, and the wind rose behind it, pushing it ahead with force. He turned the collar of his coat up and bent his head into the rising storm. He was suddenly grateful for the lights and warmth of Lone Tree. He had asked Julia to dinner, but he was not hungry. He needed something stronger than food to chase the chill that seemed to hold him tonight.

He turned into O'Hara's First Chance saloon and made his way through the room, returning the greetings absently. He stood at the bar, soaking up the warmth and the liquor, and neither had the power to chase his heavy mood. Barstow and Stout joined him, and he was grateful for their companionship.

Barstow said jovially, "DePalma has a bad night to make tracks in."

Short's voice was vicious. "I wish he had been one of the bodies we tallied."

Thurston nodded. The mention of DePalma fed his worry. He wondered how much of a loss Julia felt with DePalma's going. Julia had been friendly with him, but then she was friendly with most men. He tried to find his comfort from the last, but it was not enough. He was busy with his thoughts, not responding to Barstow's and Short's talk, and his taciturnity soon drove them away.

He drank for an hour, then pushed the bottle from him. It only made his thoughts press in more sharply about him, and he walked out of the room.

He stood out before the saloon, indecision stamping his face. He could not make up his mind about a little thing like going to bed, and he felt a quick irritation. He was a man who ordinarily saw his road straight and clear before him.

He turned towards the hotel, and a voice called, "Ed."

He waited, and O'Hara came out of the darkness. His face and clothes were thickly mantled with snow. He was panting from his hurrying and an inner excitement.

"Bad night," Thurston said.

"Ed." O'Hara's voice rose against the wind. "DePalma and Meade got Julia. I just saw them riding off with her."

O'Hara's words created a dull numbness in Thurston, blocking his speech. A queer, irrelevant thought ran through his mind. Big Horse riders spent a lot of money in O'Hara's saloon and dance hall. O'Hara should be one of the ones who hated Thurston.

O'Hara's fingers bit into his arm. "Didn't you hear me? They got Julia." He read Thurston's thoughts and said, "A woman shouldn't be dragged into this."

Thurston swung his head in a half circle. Snow fell thickly, blotting out the lights across the street. A panic swelled inside him. A trail wouldn't last long in this fall.

"Where would they go?" he asked helplessly.

"He can't go far in a storm like this." O'Hara gave it quick thought. "There's that old line cabin about twelve miles from here. It would be a logical place to sit out a storm."

Thurston eyed him a long moment and O'Hara said, "If you want me to go with you—"

THURSTON shook his head and turned towards the hotel. Barstow came out of the saloon, and Thurston hailed him. "My horse is at the livery stable," he said. "Saddle him for me."

He hurried down the walk, letting his explanations wait. He strode into the hotel, and Brady and Kate were in the lobby.

"Is Julia here?" he demanded sharply.

"I saw her about a half hour ago," Brady said. "Haven't seen her since." His eyes narrowed. "What is it, Thurston?"

Thurston shook his head. Their worry wouldn't help him. "Nothing. I'll see you later," and hurried out of the door.

He half ran to the livery stable, and Barstow had his horse ready.

"What is it, Ed?"

"O'Hara saw DePalma take Julia with him. I checked at the hotel. She's not there."

Barstow turned towards the livery stable entrance, and Thurston said, "My fight, Jim. The other belonged to the valley. This is personal."

"Don't be a damn fool, Ed. One man—"

Thurston swung into the saddle and headed down the street. Snow was already packing

underfoot, and the horse fought and protested at being taken out into this kind of night. Thurston kept a hard hand on the reins, forcing the animal into the wind. Julia could be somewhere in town, but he couldn't take a chance on losing time in making a search. Thurston knew the country, and he would have picked that line cabin had he been in DePalma's boots. O'Hara might be lying, but Thurston had to find out for himself. The need was an actual hand on his coat sleeve, pulling him along.

The bitter drive of the storm was in his face. For a few miles he could follow the main road, leading out of town, and even on this fairly level surface the going was mean. The snow was a solid, white wall, and Thurston's eyes could penetrate it only a few yards. He would turn off at the bridge and follow the creek up the valley. He knew he would not be able to see the bridge until he was almost upon it, but his eyes kept straining to pick it out. Time and distance lost their meaning in the wind-swept, bitter night. The pony was a humping mass of protest, and only Thurston's hard insistence kept it going.

He was on the bridge before he realized it, the snow muffling his horse's hoofs against the wood. He turned the animal, found the trail, and headed into it.

The snow was loose and drifting here, and the horse bucked it with shuddering steps. The low line of trees, bordering the creek to his left, was his only landmark. A few steps of the trail, and those would be blotted from sight.

The wind buffeted and beat at him, the snow sifted in beneath his upturned coat collar, melting and wetting him. The effort of fighting the storm drained him, leaving him exhausted and aching.

The cabin sat in a small clearing, just off the creek. He couldn't miss it, yet he was sure he had. He was ready to retrace his steps when he saw the solid bulk of the line cabin looming up blackly against the white background.

Julia and DePalma. They had to be here. This was the nearest shelter DePalma could expect, and the night was too tough to go farther.

Thurston slid from his horse and moved towards the cabin, sinking into the calf-high snow. He circled the cabin and saw no tracks, but he expected that. The heaviness of the fall and the drifting before the wind would obliterate marks almost as soon as they were made. He pressed against the log wall, listening. All he heard was the moan of the wind. There was no unusual sound to suggest human presence, yet something was wrong, and he felt it.

He kept tight-pressed against the wall and moved to the door. He looked around, and his horse was moving off, seeking shelter in a bunch of pines to the cabin's left. He couldn't expect the animal to stand in this storm.

He hesitated a long moment, and the wind and the storm were the only sounds in the world. He drew his gun with heavy, awkward fingers. His other hand found the door latch—he lifted it and kicked open the door. He waited and nothing happened. There was no movement, no sound. He went through the door in a bound, getting out of the faint light the open door made.

INSIDE he waited, and his ears ached with the strain of listening. The wind was muted by the thickness of the walls, and his feeling of danger made the air of the cabin thick and warm.

He fumbled in his pocket, found a match, and lighted it. Its tiny glow made little impression against the blackness. His eyes tried to reach beyond the match's radius, but he saw nothing. He held it until it burned down against his fingers, then dropped it to the dirt floor. He moved to the center of the room, bumped against a table and heard the clink of a lamp globe. He lighted another match, lifted the globe, touched the wick, and the growing light pressed the shadows back into the corners. His mind tried to tell him something, but he was too tired to catch it.

"It took you long enough to get here, Thurston."

He half turned at the sound of the voice, and something hard rammed into his back.

"Drop it, drop it!" DePalma said.

Thurston's mind had tried to warn him. The lamp globe had been slightly warm. If he hadn't been so tired and so intent on Julia, he would have known someone had been in this cabin only a short while before. He let his gun drop to the floor, and a little sigh escaped him.

DePalma said, "Get it, Meade," and Meade came out of a corner, his hard, flat face filled with animal joy.

DePalma came around from behind Thurston, and Pullman moved from the far wall to join him.

The three of them stood with their guns on Thurston, their eyes aflame with expectancy.

Thurston ran his tongue over his lips. "You got O'Hara to plant the story and suggest this cabin."

DePalma's voice was almost pleasant. "O'Hara owed me a favor. Julia heldped, too. She stayed out of the way while you went looking for her." His lips lifted with a sneer. "You didn't think she'd turn to you, did you?"

He strode back and forth as he talked, only his movements showing his emotion. DePalma was a small man, but no one had ever underestimated him. His face was cut with harsh,

cruel lines, and his black eyes had the hungry light of a hunting ferret.

He stepped up to Thurston and cut him across the face with his hand. "You did a good job, friend. You broke up Big Horse. Right now we can't go back into the valley. But with you gone and a little time—" He ran his tongue over his lips, tasting the thought.

He read the question in Thurston's eyes and said, "We could have got you in town or picked you off as you neared the cabin. But I wanted you to know who did it. Meade and Pullman are a little sore at you, too. They want a little satisfaction." His voice rose sharply. "Take him, boys."

Meade and Pullman unbuckled their gunbelts and tossed them to DePalma. They moved at Thurston on slow, heavy feet.

Thurston backed against the far wall. It would have been better if he had tried to shoot his way out. Now he faced a bad beating, and he still would not leave this cabin.

Meade constructed his backing as fear and pushed ahead of Pullman. He kept wetting his thick lips as his big hands reached for Thurston.

Thurston came off the wall with a rush. He sledged his right hand into Meade's face, and the blow knocked Meade into Pullman. Thurston followed it, his fists flailing away, and they did cruel things to Meade's face. He kept Meade in between them, and for a few seconds things went his way. He put his knee into Meade's belly, and the big man sank to the floor, a slobbering cry coming from his lips.

DePalma moved in, his voice raging. "What the hell—do I have to do everything?"

Pullman was on Thurston, and Thurston had his hands full. DePalma struck with his gun barrel, and the blow ripped a bloody furrow above Thurston's ear. It beat him down to his knees, and he hung there, the room whirling about him.

"Now can you handle him?" DePalma asked, his voice savagely contemptuous.

MEADE was back on his feet, the hurt in his face replaced by an animal wildness. He grabbed a handful of Thurston's coat, twisted and jerked him to his feet. He hammered his fists into Thurston's face and his knuckles broke skin and flesh. Pullman pounded at him from the side, and DePalma danced around them, the blood-letting feeding and swelling his savagery.

Thurston was almost done. The room seemed full of haze and faces swirled about him. His arms were heavy, and he couldn't get them before all of the blows.

He felt something sharp in his back. They had backed him into the door latch. Meade held him erect with one hand, held the other cocked high. "You ain't doing so well, you tramp rancher."

"Finish it, finish it," DePalma yelped.

Thurston's head swayed away from Meade's smashing fist. He heard the thud as Meade's fist hit the log, heard Meade's anguished howl. He stamped hard, and his high heel caught Pullman on the instep. He heard the sound of splintering bones, his foot seemed to go all the way to the floor, and Pullman fell, his face contorted with pain. Pullman scrabbled around, reaching for his maimed foot, and Thurston stifled a crazy impulse to laugh. He took a step at Meade, butted hard with his head, and the sharp shock of it rattled his teeth. He took Meade full in the face, and Meade's features flattened out. Meade went over backwards, and his moaning was curiously high-pitched and womanish.

DePalma stood quite still, surprise holding his face in its grip. This wasn't right, this couldn't be. Thurston was a whipped man, and whipped men didn't come back this way. For a split second he made a good target, and Thurston threw his left. He forgot it was injured, forgot it until it landed, and the fierce, sweeping pain locked his jaws.

DePalma went down in a spinning whirl. He bounced with the agility of a cat and threw a shot at Thurston.

Thurston whirled, threw open the door and tore out into the night. He had hoped that he could knock the gun out of DePalma's hand and recover it, but it hadn't worked that way.

He heard DePalma's enraged yelling as he ran from the cabin. The cold air stung his battered face, and the hurt swept some of the pain and dizziness away. He was afraid to take the time to look for his horse, afraid to remain near the cabin. He kept the trail to his right, fearful of getting too far from it and losing himself in the storm. He had no plan, no thought, only to put as much distance between himself and the cabin as he could.

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MOST FOR YOUR MONEY—FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

DePalma's yelling still sounded back of him. Thurston ran until his lungs were a mass of fire, until his legs rebelled and would not track. He slowed his pace and lurched on in a drunken, stumbling walk. DePalma would probably get his horse, and that gave Thurston a few more minutes.

He saw a dark mass moving towards him on the trail and, as it neared, saw it was three riders. He didn't think these men rode for DePalma, but he was afraid to hail them. He turned and plunged towards a belt of pines, trying to reach cover. A woman's voice rang out over the whip of the wind.

"Ed—Ed!"

His legs wouldn't hold him then, and he sank into the snow. He saw the riders leave the trail and plow towards him, and the relief in his mind was a painful thing.

Kate was off her horse, her arms strong and protecting about him.

Barstow said, "You damn fool. Kate just happened to see you and sang out."

Kate bent her head close. "Julia saw you ride out of town, Ed. She came back to the hotel then."

Brady said, "Kate told me what she guessed. I found Barstow and we looked up O'Hara. After a little persuading he talked."

"Julia knew about it," Thurston said slowly. "She was part of DePalma's plan."

"Ah," Kate said, and there was hurt in her voice for him. "You've found out."

Thurston pushed himself to his feet. "DePalma will be right behind me. He's not aiming to let me go. Give me your gun, Barstow."

Kate's fingers pulled at him. "No," and her voice was a little moan.

Thurston said gravely, "The personal reason is gone. DePalma is still a powerful man. When men like O'Hara will still do his bidding—" he shook his head—"DePalma hasn't given up thoughts of the valley yet."

He took Barstow's extended gun and, holding it in his hand, turned back up the trail.

HE HEARD the horses before he saw them. He stepped off the trail and waited.

Meade's voice was thick and broken. "Damn him. Damn him." The sound came from mashed lips. "I'll break him in two."

"You had your chance," DePalma said savagely. "I'll handle him now."

Thurston stepped into the trail before the horses. "DePalma," he yelled.

The horses reared. Thurston saw the dark mass of a man silhouetted against the sky. He fired twice—rapid, rolling shots. The horse nickered shrilly—the dark mass slid from its back, tearing screams coming from it.

Meade, Thurston thought grimly. I'd rather it was DePalma.

Flame lanced at him. Three times DePalma shot, but he was shooting from a plunging horse, and his shots were wild.

Thurston shot at the rider and hit the horse. The animal went down, threshing and kicking about in the snow. A figure crawled away from it, and Thurston snapped a shot. Against the white snow he saw DePalma hunch up and turn and knew he had missed.

DePalma's slug kissed his cheek. Thurston had one shell left and with the curtain of snow and the poor light he could take no chances. He ran at DePalma. Flame spat at him, and he took a heavy, numbing blow in his left shoulder. It spun and staggered him, but he held his feet and plunged on. He was on top of DePalma when he fired, and he saw the figure go slack and spill across the snow.

Blackness swept in in heavy waves, and Thurston folded up limply.

His eyes were heavy, and he couldn't open them. It was too much effort; the blackness was reaching for him, and it was better so.

He heard a voice say, "Quit worrying, Kate. I've looked him over. He's all right. You can't kill a trouble man."

Thurston opened his eyes.

"You finished your job this time," Brady said.

Thurston shook his head. "Pullman's in the cabin."

"Barstow went up there to rout him out. It's over, Ed."

Thurston's eyes were on Kate's face. Her face was wet, and he couldn't be sure if it was the snow or tear marks. She was beautiful, he realized, and this time there would be no thought of Julia for comparison.

"When I found out about Julia," he said slowly, "I wasn't hurt. It was like I was expecting it all along. I was just mad for being a damn fool. Kate, you knew how she felt about DePalma all the time?"

"I didn't want you to be hurt," she whispered.

He reached for her hand with a new-found conviction. "Sometimes you have to travel a long trail to find out what you wanted was right at the start of it."

"Ah," Brady said, and there was relief in his voice. "I knew one of my girls was going to be hurt whether you got DePalma or he got you. But I didn't want it to be Kate. Julia's just like her mother was. I guess Kate's my favorite." He grinned broadly. "Kate marked you for her own when she first saw you. It made me mad when you couldn't see it. I thought for a while she was going to be disappointed. It sure—"

"Dad," Kate cried. She hid her face from Thurston. "Don't tell him—"

"Shut up, Matt," Thurston ordered. "Let Kate tell me."

LAST STOP—BOOTHILL

By FRANK MORRIS

Without warning he leaped at McClusky....

Len Mitchell's hungry sixes were ready to give even his son a lawman's heritage—six feet underground!

AGAIN the low wail came from behind the door. The doctor's soothing bass was there, too, but it didn't lessen the hard core of dread that filled Len Mitchell, mingling with his bitterness.

"Little Pete—he's bad sick?" a gaunt homesteader asked, leaning over the bootmaker's counter.

"Mighty sick." Len Mitchell nodded and mumbled around the mouthful of shoe nails, "About as sick as this town an' the county, I reckon, since Brick McClusky started the big squeeze." He let it drop there. The two things were hardly compatible; yet in his mood they were one. He put his eyes back to the

job before him—to the work that must be done.

His black hair was shaggy, a stranger to a barber's shears. His long face was thick-boned, weather-bronzed, and the small seams around his eyes spoke of late pain and frustration and disappointment. His shoulders, though broad, were humped by long hours over his bootmaker's bench.

He sorted through the box until he found his largest last. Placing it on the iron stand between his knees, he worked on at the homesteader's grass-slicked brogans.

There was no ease today in his movements. His big sure hands seemingly had lost their cunning. Yet he hurried, almost feverishly, clawing off the remains of the old soles, cutting and placing the new. The cement pot, when he uncovered it, added its musty tang to the good clean odor of oak-tanned leather and harness that clung to and was a part of the shop.

From time to time he glanced apprehensively at the closed door leading to his living quarters at the rear and the taste of the brass clinch-nails in his mouth seemed as acrid as the bitterness which surged through him. His long fingers explored the paper-thin uppers of the shoes, the worn seams, and they were like a mockery of his very life. His and that of the grim, work-stooped farmer across the counter. For he knew that when the job was finished, he wouldn't have the courage to make a charge, for all his care and use of good material.

It was a pattern he had helplessly watched take shape. Brick McClusky and his bonanza wheat ranch were playing a freeze-out against the homesteaders and small cow ranchers of Burlee County. No one had any money now, no actual cash; barter had become the medium of exchange. But hams and eggs and fresh bread traded for his work wouldn't send little Pete to the hospital.

With the soles tacked down, Len stood up, straightened the kinks from his long, tired back. He stepped to the buffer treadle, toed it into motion and smoothed the edges of the new half-soles. When he placed the completed shoes on the counter, a measure of his kindly good nature returned and tiredness eased the tense lines about his mouth.

"It's all right, Morrie," he said gently, watching the homesteader slowly pull a slack purse from a pocket and unsnap the clasp. "You keep it for me till your crops come in."

Morrie Hansen said, a dull flush creeping up to his sun-browned ears, "You gotta eat."

"Bring me a mess of prairie chicken, Morrie." Len grinned and shook his shaggy black hair. He'd learned to be careful with these dry-farm homesteaders. They had pride as vast as the Dakota plains. "Just an odd end of sole leather I used, Morrie," he added and shoved the shoes toward the farmer. "Give my best to the wife and kids."

DOC BENNETT came into the room, put his black bag on the counter and watched Morrie Hansen's flat back retreat up Gray Butte's heat-scorched thoroughfare.

"That kinda doin's won't put Pete in Yankton, Len," the doctor said, his voice strangely soft. He stared curiously at the bootmaker.

"Then Pete has to go to the hospital?"

"Yep. St. Ann's in Yankton." Bennett's gray thatch nodded. Age had sifted into the medico's blue eyes, fading them. There was gentleness in his deep voice when he added, "That burn on his foot—you let it go too long, Len. Blood poison'. I've done every last thing I know how an' it ain't enough."

"Reckon I oughta be kicked." Mitchell's square jaw dipped toward the floor. "Me a bootmaker, an' lettin' the kid go barefoot. But Pete didn't tell me he got singed. I—I just haven't got the money to send him, Doc."

Some of Doc Bennett's old sternness was coming back now. But it was for himself, to quiet what was going on inside his paunchy middle.

"I know, Len," he said quietly. "I know." He had no suggestions and picked up his bag. The screen door banged behind him.

Defeat more desperate than anything he had ever known washed through Len. He removed his apron, started for the rear door, when the two rigs clattered to a stop outside.

Len turned slowly, his eyes sunken ice chips, hardly believing what he saw. Big Brick McClusky jumped from his long-bodied spring wagon. Two of the wheat rancher's hired hands followed from the other rig, and all three men crowded into the shop.

McClusky tramped heavily to the counter that cut off the rear section of the shop. He was a big man, with legs bowed from much time in the saddle. His straight shoulders were massive, tapering to lean hips. His face would have been good-looking if it hadn't been for the lines of grimness radiating from his eyes and mouth. It remained a strong face—and a confident one.

Although he operated the largest of the new bonanza wheat ranches in the Red River Valley, he still wore the cowboy clothing of his earlier years. It wasn't an affectation, Len knew. The sprawling big MC outfit also ran cattle, two thousand head and more, north of Yanktonai Creek, along with the five thousand acres of durham wheat land.

McClusky wiped a wide palm over his flushed, heavy-jowled face.

"Got a pile of work out there in them two wagons, bootmaker," he said, his voice a deep rumble.

Len's eyes narrowed, shuttled to the window and beyond to the two loaded rigs. One of them was filled to the sideboards with a tangle of harness and horse collars. The other contained a half dozen saddles and the loose, snake-like coils of a separator belt.

"Startin' roundup next week," McClusky rumbled. "Cuttin' wheat soon's I can sign on a crew. After that, my hay gang moves out to cut the coulees below Yanktonai Creek. Think you can doctor up them sets of harness an' go over the collars?"

Interest crowded into Len's brain. He had had no personal fight with McClusky. It was just the big man's way of doing things, his arrogance and ruthless insistence on the dependency of others that rankled Len, made him feel antagonistic. But maybe here was the means of getting the money to send Pete to the hospital, or at least a good part of it. He grinned.

"Sure, Mr. McClusky," he said softly, keeping the distaste from his voice. "Anything made out of leather I can fix or make seconds."

"How about that separator belt? Web's frayed, and it needs a coat of red lead."

"I'll take its measure and build you another out of good oak leather," Len said. "Something that'll last you more'n a season."

McClusky nodded briefly.

"Them saddles need lookin' over, too. One of 'em's a mighty purty hull. Got it too near a cook fire—last spring calf gather—burned off part of the skirt an' scorched the fenders."

Len felt sudden hope lift the tight knot in his flat stomach. He'd work night and day. Maybe he could get an advance and send Pete to Yankton on the morning train. As easy as that. The homesteaders couldn't blame him for that. After all, he was in business to serve anybody that needed his services.

"Sure," Len said quickly. "Bring in the stuff. I'll get busy."

He helped McClusky's two ranch hands and they brought the contents of both wagons into the shop and piled it against the rear wall.

"An' start on them saddles first, the scorched one," McClusky ordered, from around the flat sides of a new cigar.

MORRIE HANSEN came into the shop, half of a brown fresh-smoked ham in his hands. Len saw him and straightened up from the tangled harness on the floor.

"You shouldn't've done that, Morrie," he said.

Hansen said, "The wife—she figured if you wouldn't take no money. So this here ham might come in handy."

He placed the meat on the counter and turned around, to stop suddenly, his blue eyes hot on Brick McClusky standing there beside the door, rocking on his bootheels. McClusky blew smoke into the farmer's face and laughed when Hansen coughed. Hansen wheeled and stalked out.

McClusky cleared his throat, his gaze shifting to the stocky, slack-chinned MC hand near the door. The cowhand nodded silently to Brick and turned out to follow Hansen down street, a six-shooter slapping his narrow hip.

"Damn stiff-necked yokels," McClusky muttered to Len. "All on the prod again' me an' my MC iron. They fought me when I was running cattle exclusively. Now I'm raisin' thirty-bushel wheat, they're up on their hind legs worse'n ever. I'm on the move an' this country's moving ahead with me."

"Yeah, I reckon," Len grunted, then felt quick anger surge over him. Why should he toady to this arrogant, greedy man? Little Pete, if he could understand, wouldn't want his father to so abase himself.

Len lifted his eyes, shot a quick glance at McClusky, and knew a moment of panicky fear. Not for himself—he was inured to the ways of violence. That had once been his life—till he met Molly Saunders. When he married her he laid away his guns, settled down into a more prosaic way of life. He feared for little Pete. He had to have this work that McClusky was offering him.

Or did he? Little Pete didn't have to be doctored with dirty money. Len's streak of honesty was wide. It allowed no deviation, at least in his thoughts. It even pushed little Pete from momentary consideration. Right was right.

"Fencin' them in, makin' 'em pay trespass for roads to their hundred an' sixties sure ain't calculated to make them your friends, McClusky," he offered.

Swift anger blazed in Brick McClusky's little eyes. It was a hard flinty stare he turned on the bootmaker.

"You want this work?" the big man demanded hotly.

"I sure need it," Len answered softly. "But—" he broke off. While talking, he'd placed the full stamped saddle McClusky said he wanted fixed first on a wooden horse and was staring at it. He lifted the seat leather, where it circled down over the fender. There it was. His LM in a circle, the little brand he stamped on all his saddle and harness work.

McClusky saw him staring at the saddle and moved toward him.

"What's the matter, bootmaker?" he snapped. "You can fix up that rig, can't you?"

"Yeah," Len said dryly, and the hope of a moment ago was seeping from him. "It's a pretty hull, all right—but it's got the mark of trouble on it."

"What d'you mean?" McClusky growled

savagely. His small eyes turned hot—ugly.

"It's Brad Grome's saddle, McClusky." Len stepped back. "I stamped the fillagree. It's the saddle that was stolen when Brad's barn was burned, and his B-Bar-M stock run off." Len's voice was grave.

The old feeling of distaste built up within him. And all the old signals of trouble seemed to fill the air around him as he watched Brick McClusky's little eyes change expression, to become mere slits of cold flint.

"What d'you mean by that?" McClusky demanded. His voice held a rising sharpness.

"You might have to answer questions about how you got it," Len said dryly. "Maybe not to me—but the parties interested."

Len's face was white. It was said now.

McClusky's heavy shoulders straightened. He threw his cigar to the floor and snapped his eyes to another MC cowhand lounging by the door.

"What'n hell you think of that, Sutter?" he asked.

The tall cowpuncher in faded levis and greasy Stetson grinned wolfishly, his stubbled face lengthening into long cruel lines. He dropped a hand to the six-shooter on his belt, rattling his spurs over the floor toward Len Mitchell.

Len felt a red anger build up within him. A surge of blood darkened his face, hardened the lines around his mouth. Without warning, he leaped at Brick McClusky, his fist lashing at the rancher's red face.

His work-tempered knuckles connected with McClusky's jaw. Then the MC hand was on Len, beating him down with a long barreled .45 Colt. Sharp pain bit into Len's shoulder and his left arm went numb. Sutter shoved him against the wooden saddle horse and he went over on his back, sprawling, his long legs on the pile of harness.

"You talked yoreself into that, mister," Sutter grunted. He hefted the six-gun loosely. "You kin jest as easy talk yoreself into hell."

"Hold it, Sutter!" Brick McClusky stood over Len, his face purpled with savage rage. "You, Mitchell, fix them saddles an' harness—an' for all you do with them you'll answer to me. Get what I mean?"

Len rubbed feeling back into his numb arm. His eyes were thin slits in his long face. For a long moment he lay sprawled on the harness, staring up at the two men. Brick McClusky was no fool, no simple-minded clodhopper. Len's eyes grew speculative. Then, slowly, he stood up.

BACK in the rear room Lem stood long beside the old paint-chipped bed where Little Pete tossed. He placed a big hand on Pete's hot forehead, and the kid's gray eyes, that were so like his own, opened.

"Dad," the kid said, "when we goin' to where it's cool?" He thrashed the covers off, crying softly when his swollen leg moved on the punchy springs. "Doc said we was goin' to Yankton an' stay at the 'Kinzie Hotel, an' ever'thing. Are we, Dad? Huh? Are we?"

Len bit at his lips, passed a hand over his weary eyes.

"I reckon," he said slowly and got a dipper of water from the bucket in the kitchen. It wasn't very cool, but it'd have to do. He held it for Pete to drink, his eyes on the tintype of the pretty-faced girl on the bureau. To himself, he said, *she'd want that, if she was here—no matter what.* His lips thinned to a grim line.

Repairing McClusky's saddles and harness, making a new separator belt, didn't seem right. Not in the light of his suspicions that McClusky was back of the trouble flooding the range. But he didn't have any proof of that. Just his own suspicions. The saddle might well have come to McClusky's hands honestly. He wished now he'd asked more questions about it, before flying off the handle—but he wasn't even sure that the wish was honest.

He put a cold wet cloth over Pete's leg and went back into the shop. He stood for long moments in hesitation, then jammed on his hat and left the shop, striding toward Doc Bennett's small shanty office at the end of Main Street. He'd get doc to look in again on Pete. He'd settle at least a part of his doubts immediately. On his way back from Doc Bennett's, he stopped stock still in front of Hanover's General Store, stared at the fly-specked windows with their jumble of goods, and didn't see any of it. Another thought struck him—he suddenly remembered the MC cowhand who had followed Morrie Hansen out of the shop.

He almost broke into a run for the other end of town where the clump of cottonwoods shaded the springs that gave Gray Butte an excuse for existence. If Hansen was still in town, he would find him there, the spot where most of the homesteaders parked their wagons while going about their town shopping and bartering.

And when he pulled to a walk at the cross street he saw Morrie's rig, all right, pulled in close to the water trough. The farmer's wife and a couple of kids were perched up on the plank seat in the rickety old wagon. But there was no sign of the homesteader's tall, gaunt form.

As he passed the Diamond Bar Saloon, Len was halted in his tracks by Brad Grome.

"Wait up, there, bootmaker," the cowman said, reached out a wiry arm and pulled Len toward the swing doors of the bar. "I just been down to your shop," Grome growled. "Seen a hull in there, Mitchell. My hull. The

same one that was supposed to have been burned when them skunks set fire to my barn. What d'you know about that hull, huh?"

Len shrugged. He wanted desperately to put off decision, one way or the other. If he sided with Grome, told the little rancher what he knew, turned the saddle over to him, he would have Brick McClusky and his hired gunmen hot on his trail—and he didn't want that too soon.

"Shucks, Brad," he said, and forced a smile. "I—"

"Who brought that saddle into your shop? An' when? That's all I want to know—but pronto! Unless'n *you* had somethin' to do with it. Then you're goin' to answer to me—right now!"

Len blinked and sucked in a quick breath. That point hadn't occurred to him—that anyone would think he might be mixed up with McClusky.

He caught the odor of whiskey on Grome's breath. The cowman was ugly mad, ready for a fight. And Len couldn't blame him. That fire had almost wiped Grome out, and with the rustling that had been hitting his little spread in the past few months, he was about ready to throw his rope over the door and call it quits.

"Reckon I can't tell you just yet—who brought in the saddle," Len said slowly, and pulled away from Grome. "You're spoilin' for a fight, Grome an' that won't help things none."

"McClusky—that's who it was," Grome growled, wagging his hawk-beaked face. "If you're tryin' to cover up for that varmint—"

"I ain't coverin' up for him or nobody else." Len's voice was sharp. "I'm a bootmaker. It ain't my business who brings in what—my business now is a sick kid I gotta get to the hospital. Not you, nor anybody else is goin' to stop that."

He pulled away from the cowman, hurried on down the walk without looking back. Behind him he could hear the cattleman cursing McClusky and the town and the times, then stamping back into the saloon.

IT WAS dynamite for Grome to go on the prod for McClusky. He wouldn't have a chance. The big rancher was quick with a gun. And the tall, wolf-faced Sutter was his shadow. The lean gunman would shoot first and ask the questions later. It was said that Sutter got a hundred a month just to keep trouble away from his red-faced boss.

Len went on to the Hansen wagon, but the farmer's wife didn't know where Morrie was. The two tow-headed kids stared at him owlishly, soberly quiet.

"How's Pete, Mr. Mitchell?" the older one asked. "He sure was lucky gettin' outa that barn with no more'n a burned foot—" he stopped.

Len, about to turn away, whirled around, his lean face tense as he stared at the kid.

"Barn? What about a barn, Ole?" he demanded. "Pete didn't tell me he was in a barn."

The kid looked scared and leaned against his mother. Mrs. Hansen put a soothing hand on Ole's shoulder.

"Your Pete was playing with the boys," she told Len with a little half-smile. "He came ridin' out on that white pony you gave him."

"Sure," nodded Len quickly. "Sure, but there wasn't any fire at your place, was there?"

Mrs. Hansen's face turned grave, and the work and worry lines about her lips deepened.

"No," she answered slowly, "but we're only two miles from Brad Grome's place, you know. The boys saw his barn flare up, I think, and went over there to watch. Isn't that right, Ole?"

The youngster ducked his head in assent and snuggled down closer to his mother, then jerked up.

"But we didn't start it," he added, his eyes suddenly bright with fear. "We didn't have nothin' to do with that fire. We just seen it, an' run over there. Pete, he went inside to see if there was any horses in there, because there wasn't no cowhands around the place right then. After that, Pete, he come out totin' a saddle, an' a big tall feller run out after him."

"Ole, think hard. Did you see who that man was?" Len's hands gripped the side of the wagon.

Ole flashed a scared glance at his younger brother. But Hans ducked his head and wouldn't say a word. He ran off suddenly chasing a big black and white butterfly.

Then Ole said, whispering it, "It—it was that Sutter—him that carries a gun. He said me an' Pete would git blamed for the fire—" Ole gulped, and his eyes were sky-blue marbles in his white face. "Pete said he would, too, tell, an' Sutter grabbed for him. Pete stumbled an' put his foot down on that smokin' saddle an' burned hisself. Then Sutter slapped us both, an' we run away. But I been wantin' to tell ever since."

THE sheriff of Gray Butte was an old-timer, from white drooping mustache to the old Peacemaker riding his lean hip. He got up when Len barged in, his eyes unfaded by the years, clear-blue and level.

"Sarge," Len blurted, "trouble's ready to bust this place wide open. An' there's a homesteader we got to find before Sutter gets to him."

Sarge Shaw stiffened.

"Homesteader? You mean that crazy-headed Hansen? I got him in a cell right now."

"In here? In jail?"

"Where else?" the lawman snapped. "Him an' that man of Brick McClusky's—that Squatty Muldoon—had a fight. Or rather, Hansen took Squatty apart, you might say, an' just when Squatty was about to drag his iron I come along an' saved that dumb-headed farmer's bacon. I ain't got no love for that McClusky an' his bunch—that dang renegade cowman—but Hansen had no business tacklin' a MC hand. He orter had more sense than to fight with a gunman like Muldoon. Morrie Hansen's in jail, an' he's goin' to stay there."

"Wait up, Sarge," Len said. "I saw McClusky set Muldoon on Morrie—at my shop. He sent Muldoon trailin' Morrie. You'll have to let Hansen out of jail, Sarge, or he'll be bushwhacked in his cell."

Len went on to tell what he'd learned from Hansen's kids, and about his own son's part in it.

"Morrie knows too much for his own safety, Sarge," he added. "Might be I do too, now."

The sheriff's blue eyes slitted in his leather-brown face.

"I seen McClusky pull out for his spread. Me, I'm goin' to pay that high an' mighty jasper a visit. An' here's the key—let that sodbuster out. Tell him to clear outa town, an' any others of them sodbusters or cowhands of the small spreads hereabouts—tell 'em to scatter, an' be hard to find."

Len went back into the cell corridor, found a thoroughly scared farmer, and let him out of the cell.

"I can fight—but them gunmen," Hansen growled, "they ain't for a family man to tangle with. Maybe Sarge done me a favor, all right, lockin' me up. Squatty had me plumb notched in his sights from where he lay on the walk after I'd hit him."

"You get outa town an' stay on your place," Len told him. "An' keep your eyes peeled. We ain't heard the last of Brick McClusky, you can bet."

Len went out to the square with Morrie, watched while the farmer slapped up his team and headed east for his little claim shanty three miles out of town. Then the bootmaker headed back into the main street.

When he passed the hotel he saw Sutter standing under the wooden awning over the walk. The tall gunman lifted pale eyes to Len, then turned and went into the hotel's barroom. Len didn't like it. He had a feeling the other man had been watching him.

In the gathering darkness he headed for his shop. He passed the dark bank, and suddenly remembered that Sarge Shaw would be out of town, on his way to see McClusky. He had the thought then—it wouldn't be too hard to go in there and get the money he needed; and if things got too tough after that, he still had his old gun skill. He had tried to settle this fairly, even risking the life of his son to that end, but his hand had been forced.

He let himself into the shop and hurried back to Pete in the rear room. The boy was quiet, but he was awake and opened his eyes when Len put a match to the lamp on the table.

"You—you get outa here, Sutter," Pete said, and his voice held a wild note that brought Len up stiff and tense. The kid was out of his head! Len felt his forehead. It was hot and sweaty and his breathing came harsh and rasping in the quiet. Then a squeak from the rear door whirled Len around on his toes, and Squatty Muldoon slipped his bulk into the little bedroom.

MULDOON was short, thick, but he had long arms and a low shelving forehead. Small yellow eyes gleamed from under his shaggy brows and the black barrel of a six-shooter glinted level with Len's chest.

"Stand hitched," the gunman growled, and heeled the door shut behind his back. There was a sound of soft footsteps out in the shop, but Len didn't dare take his eyes from Muldoon.

Suddenly Pete sat up in bed, his bloodshot eyes wide with terror, and Len sensed someone at his back. He felt the hair crawl on his scalp and then a voice spoke behind him, a mocking voice, raspy in its harshness. The voice of Ed Sutter.

"Thought you'd spill ever'thin' to the law, didn't you, Mitchell? But it ain't goin' to work, savvy? Let's go out in the shop, feller," he said. "Got somethin' I wanta show you."

Len stalked through the door, Squatty and Sutter following close on his heels. He stopped stock still, staring at the man prone on the floor of the shop. Little Brad Grome, eyes wide open, lay staring at the ceiling—dead, his blood seeping to the floor from a ragged red hole in the side of his head.

"You damned—" Len began, then cut it short as he saw Brick McClusky's big bulk move out of the shadow and stand spraddle-legged over the wiry body of the little cowman.

"All right, Mitchell," the wheat rancher growled. "Just you step over this away. I got somethin' to tell you."

Len felt a gun prod his back and closed in, halting at Brad's outstretched arm on the floor.

McClusky said, his voice purring softly, "You an' Grome here had a fight over that burned saddle." He pointed to the hull still on the wooden horse. "You burned his barn an' stole the hull, fixin' to sell it—an' that kid of yours was along an' got hurt. Brad came

in today an' saw the rig an' you an' him had it out. Brad got plugged, an' so did you—an' Grome's spread goes to me."

Hot rage surged through Len—so that was the plan. McClosky had brought in the saddle purposely to frame him, had probably sent Grome in earlier to look at the hull.

Len grated, "Sheriff Shaw knows the truth."

"He did." McClusky grinned slyly. "But only him an' the devil are goin' to palaver about it. Sarge is dead, shot by that homesteader Hansen when he went out to collect Hansen for breakin' outa jail."

"That's a lie," Len snarled. "Hansen didn't break jail. An' Sarge went out to tag the whole thing on you."

McClasky snapped, "Sarge went out to collect Hansen. The soddy shot the lawman an' skinned out, takin' his family with him. Sarge is layin' out there in Sioux Coulee right now, with soddy lead in him. I say so. Get it?"

"You killed Sarge—scared off Hansen?" Len asked.

"All right, that's the way it happened," McClusky agreed. But *you* ain't goin' to tell about it, because you're goin' to be planted up on Gray Butte. Sutter, buffalo this dang bootmaker, an' lay a club or a hammer or somethin' beside him so's it'll look like him an' Brad had it out here in the shop."

Len felt his skin crawl as he saw Sutter lift his six-shooter. Here it was—the end of everything. Curiously, now that it was here, he felt no fear, only helplessness and a brimming regret. He listened hard for a sound from the back room—some little sound from Pete that he could take with him into eternity.

It came with a crash and a sound of falling. Something clanked on the floor, slithered along it, to come to rest against Len's foot.

Len whirled, saw Pete sprawled behind a pile of harness; then caught sight of his own gun nestling against his boot.

In a split-second reaction he fell on it. Sutter fired, but the slug spatted into the wall over him. And then the familiar weapon bucked in his palm.

Sutter jerked around, surprise and wonder on his sharp face. Blood sprang to his lips and he sank slowly to the floor.

McClusky cursed and jerked at the gun on his hip as Len whirled on the big man against the wall. Squatty's gun roared and hot fire lanced across his ribs, as Len's toe kicked the gun from McClusky's shaking fingers. He followed the kick through by coming to his feet and his fist crashed against McClusky's jaw, sent him stumbling to the floor. He bent and scooped up an armful of harness, dropped it over the struggling rancher, pinning him down.

Pete's shrill voice screamed and Len gritted his teeth over the pain of the wound in his side. Someway he managed to swing around as Squatty's gun flamed once again. Pete ran a few staggering steps toward his father and fell.

Something snapped in Len Mitchell's brain. He was a raging, charging wild man, then, diving at the squat gunman. He didn't realize he'd dropped the gun when he picked up the harness to throw at McClusky. All he wanted was to get his fingers into Squatty's thick throat.

When he did, he fell forward, sharp elbows driving the breath from Squatty's panting lungs. The pressure of his kneading fingers increased, twisting the flesh like wet leather until the gunman's head suddenly jerked limply and rolled over on his heavy shoulders.

Len pushed himself away from the dead Squatty and rolled over on his back, trying to keep the strange blackness from his eyes. Dimly he saw Pete. The kid was pulling himself up against the door, the yellow lamplight from the back room spilling into the shambles of the shop and throwing a ghostly light over his scared face. A sickly grin twisted his lips. His face was a yellow-white, with no trace of the fever of a while ago. In his hand he held the bootmaker's pegging hammer.

Doc Bennett burst into the shop, the lantern in his hand throwing more light into the place.

"Len! Pete!" the old medico called sharply. He threw a hurried glance at the bootmaker, let his eyes rest a long moment on Pete and surprise flicked in their depths. Then he went to the prone McClusky and the dead Sutter and Squatty, flashed the lantern into their faces. Grim-faced Sarge Shaw stalked into the shop, gun in hand.

Len felt a drowsy quiet stealing over his body, as though he'd like nothing better than to turn over and go to sleep. Or maybe he was asleep—or dead. Hadn't McClusky said that Sarge was dead? But the lawman's bandaged head didn't look like a ghost's in that lantern light, and his deep rumbling voice was a live thing in the room.

"There he is, the damned skunk!" The lawman's toe stirred Sutter's shoulder. "I was huntin' that owlhooter when I heard them shots in here. When I got back to the office a while ago, I found a reward notice in the mail. This man Cutter." He turned and looked at McClusky on the floor under the tangle of harness. "Big bonanza wheat rancher, he called hisself. Like Hades! It's a bootmaker's bonanza, I call it. That thousand-dollar reward for that feller that called hisself Sutter sure orta send Pete to the hospital."

"No hospital for Pete, now," Doc Bennett said, putting an arm around the kid's slim shoulders. "Reckon this hell town cleanup broke the tough little wind-belly's fever."

LAST DEAL

CHAPTER ONE

Red Gold

A HIGH wind had been blowing since early morning. A thin, savage, sharp wind which cushioned off of the bleak scarps of the upper peaks and funneled into the gulch with a force so steady that it kept the trees bent at an unnatural angle and nearly motionless before it. With the first slanting flakes of snow, Jim Kent saw Chalmers come down the ice-rutted street.

Chalmers was wearing a fur helmet and mackinaw and thick leather mittens. There was a strange aura of urgency about him, even to the way he walked. Kent frowned. Roy Chalmers knew rock and mining geology better than any man in Gregory Gulch, but there were many things he had yet to learn. Not to give himself away so openly—not to make his business so obvious and so public.

Kent wondered if Chalmers knew his passage down the street would be marked by many eyes; that meaning would be read into it; that so little a thing as a man's manner as he walked down a storm-shrouded street could set ugly and dangerous tides in motion. It

By
TOM W.
BLACKBURN

Chalmers was the man he had said had no sand—now Tim watched the gun, fascinated. . . .

"Any man here can have my winnings —if he'll follow me to die for them!"

seemed unlikely. Chalmers was too sure of himself to be aware of the thinking of others.

Kent swung back on his stool to face the rough lunch counter. Ruth McKean was busily washing dishes behind it. Behind her the big sheet iron stove glowed against the outer cold and her little kitchen was a pleasant place, a homey setting for her beauty and her steady practicality—a guarantee that her restaurant would be a success, regardless of the general fortunes of the gulch. She was, Kent thought, something a man could want.

"Here we go—" he said softly, foreknowledge making his voice heavy with resignation.

Ruth looked up. Her face was set in a blank mask—the same mask she always turned toward him. It made talking to her difficult and he wondered about this edged defensiveness she always used with him. She could dislike him. Or she could be a little afraid. Perhaps a blend of both. Maybe that blended feeling was a thing which the whole camp shared. The thought sawed across Kent's taut nerves.

"You're no fool, Ruth," he said. "You know what I'm talking about. It's in the way Chalmers was walking. He never even noticed the storm. He's uncovered the high grade he's been claiming he'd hit. And if you know it and I know it, so will everybody else by the time he's reached the foot of the street—without his saying one word. They'll know it down at Clayton's. The trouble will start there."

Ruth said nothing. She continued to look guardedly at him.

"Chalmers is heading for Simpson's to have a sample assayed, just to make sure. Why couldn't the fool have waited till the storm thickened and then just casually drifted into Simpson's office? Why couldn't he have at least stopped a minute to see you like he always does?"

"Why should he?" Ruth McKean asked acidly. "Why do we have a miners' meeting and form a miners' government for the camp? Why do we elect the hardest man among us as president and marshal? So any of us can do what we want to within the law. So we don't have to wait till dark or cover our tracks when we're on legal business! You afraid of the job you wanted so badly, Jim Kent? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

HER scorn stung. He sensed a strong measure of hatred in her, yet it could be only for the kind of man he was. His bitterness rose. He had come to Gregory Gulch for the same reason others had come. He had wanted to stake a claim and drive a tunnel in the hope of hitting the elusive course of the big vein. But he knew trouble and could sense it coming. He had talked about it, openly and bluntly, so the rest had held a meeting and he had been elected to head the camp.

But he had not wanted the job.

"I'm trying to tell you, Ruth," Kent said grimly, "that Roy Chalmers has started a landslide that may pile us all under—even you. What rock will roll first I don't know. I don't know when it will end, either. But I've seen these things and a rich strike in the middle of a remote camp that'll be snowed in tight in two days is a thing to be kept quiet till spring—not rolled baldly into the open!"

"That's all?" Ruth asked and he shook his head.

"Not quite," he admitted. "I reckon I was trying to tell you to remember this talk when the slide comes—to remember that I quit being Jim Kent when it starts. When it does, I'll have no friends, no wants and no favorites. I'll be a man trying to save the gulch from the powder kegged and fused along this street and nothing more—because enough of the gulch put my name in the ballot box."

Turning on his heel he stepped from Ruth's little restaurant into the rising storm outside. The wind pushed him roughly. He drifted with it past two partially completed buildings to a door around which the snow melted as it fell because of warmth leaking past the poorly-fitted frame. He pushed this door open and stepped into Crayton's saloon.

A good portion of the usual crowd was there. Kent noted the familiar faces and marked those who were absent in his mind. The bartender poured him a drink. He tossed it down and returned wordlessly to the street. A man was coming up toward him. He waited in the warmth of the doorway, thinking it might be Chalmers. It was not. He recognized Chunk Medford, one of the four partners who worked Clayton's two claims on shares. He nodded at the man and when he was past, Kent moved on to Bill Simpson's assay office.

A hundred feet farther on old Pop Ward came out of his makeshift hotel and made an arresting sign.

"Jim, you seen a hunk of twelve-inch milled planking lyin' around any place?" Pop asked worriedly. "Blasted wind's busted a couple of windows upstairs and I got to find something to nail over 'em afore every bed's blowed clean out the front door!"

Kent mentioned a pile of scrap lumber beside his own office and Ward shuffled off up into the wind. Kent turned and began going with the drift again. The main street of the gulch was short, but by the time he had reached the front of Simpson's place the midday dark had grown so pronounced that the lantern light behind Simpson's window did not look unnatural.

Kent tried the door of the assay office. It was locked. He knocked and drew no answer.

Growing impatient, he stepped to the window and brushed sticky snow from the pane. The lantern was on Simpson's scale stand. Simpson himself was hunched in a chair beside it, apparently engrossed with the balance before him. There was no one else in the room.

This was a jolt. Kent had been sure Chalmers had been heading for this place. Yet he was not here.

Kent called to Simpson and rapped heavily on the pane. The man within did not move. Irritation suddenly ran from Jim Kent. Stepping back to the door, he drove a heel stolidly against the planking beside the lock. The nailed latch plate pulled out and the door swung inward. Jim slid into the office and closed the door behind him.

Violence had been only a hunch while he was sitting in Ruth McKean's. It had been only an uneasiness as he came down the street, following the course Roy Chalmers had taken. But here violence was fact. Bill Simpson was dead. A heavy gun, fired at close range, had torn half of his face away.

KENT'S senses automatically recorded the scene before him. Simpson had been dead scant minutes. His wound was still bleeding strongly. The acid smell of gunpowder was strong in the heated air. And near the narrow rear door there was a faint misting of moisture, as though that door had stood momentarily open and some snow had blown in onto the planking of the floor.

The scales on the stand were empty. A pad of assay forms lay on Simpson's desk. A loose form, torn from the pad, lay beside it. Kent saw it had been filled out in Simpson's handwriting. It was a sample analysis of ore from the Golden Ruth, Chalmers' claim. Kent ran practiced eyes over the figures Simpson had entered on the sheet. There was gold in the sample, all right, but no more than the uselessly low percentage present in any ledge in the gulch.

Two things were immediately evident. Chalmers had come here. And the rock he had brought down the street with so much an air of arrogant, preoccupied elation was not from the big vein. These things were evident, yet they made no sense. Chalmers had been here and there had scarcely been time enough for someone else to have come in after he had gone. It took time for an assay to be run, even by a man like Simpson, who knew the gulch formations and was a magician with his reagents. But Roy Chalmers was a heady man, a little timid and vain only of his quick mind, and it seemed unlikely he would have shot a man as carelessly as Simpson had been shot. He had no reason, beyond disappointment in his own ore sample, to injure the assayer or to kill him.

The matter of the ore itself was contradictory, too. Simpson was accurate in his work. He had found nothing in Chalmers' sample. But Chalmers was a schooled engineer and Kent had always judged him to be an able one. A man with his training should have been able to tell the kind of rock he had and it was strange he would have brought an average piece down, thinking he had the big find.

Kent was completely puzzled. All things, he had always thought, had a way of fitting with each other. But there was no matching here. He glanced again at the completed assay sheet on Chalmers' sample and the pad beside it. Something else caught his eye. Simpson's assay forms were numbered, possibly to make bookkeeping easier. The completed assay form bore the number 1188. The top form on the pad of blanks bore the number 1190. One sheet was missing. Kent searched the office with hurried thoroughness. The sheet had vanished.

Opening the small rear door, Kent stepped into the weed lot behind the office. There was not yet enough snow on the ground to retain tracks. He was about to turn back into the building when a shadow caught his attention. He crossed to it and bent above the sprawled body of a man who had apparently fallen while running. He rolled the fellow over and recognized the heavy features of Sam Hamilton, Medford's partner and another of the four who worked the Clayton claims.

Hamilton had been shot through the upper lung. It was the kind of wound which might clip the heart and drop a man in his tracks. Or it might only shatter lung tissues and so delay death briefly. The man's position indicated he had run after he had been hit, falling only when blood filled his lungs and unconsciousness came. He was dead, but his body was still warm and limp.

Kent lifted the miner and carried him into Simpson's office, covering the body on a bunk in the corner. He turned back to Simpson at the scale stand. The assayer's right hand had fallen down between his knees. A gun dangled from his slackened fingers in such a way that it was nearly hidden between the man's boots and so had escaped Kent's attention before. He lifted the weapon, spun its cylinder to count the loads and placed it on the stand. Beside it he placed Hamilton's gun, which he had found outside beneath the miner's body.

Both weapons had been fired once, and recently. Hamilton's piece was a heavy, scarred forty-five, a slugging kind of weapon which could easily have made the great wound in Simpson's face and head. The assayer's weapon was smaller and lighter, but Hamilton's chest wound looked like the work of a small caliber weapon. Kent dropped into a chair.

These were things which fitted. Chalmers

had come. Possibly he had gone. That was hard to tell. Hamilton had come to the back door, maybe to find out how high the new sample from the Golden Ruth had assayed. Simpson had refused him. Words turned to hostility and anger. Or Hamilton was afraid he'd showed too much of his hand, demanding information about a claim with which he had no connection. He had shot Simpson. The assayer, with the peculiar reflexive action sometimes inherent in a man's body, had managed to fire—and his dying shot had nailed Hamilton in the chest. The miner, not realizing how badly he was hit, had tried to escape by the back door.

It fitted. Too easily and too incredibly. And it did not account for Chalmers. It was, Kent thought, time to talk to the engineer. Snuffing the lamp, he stepped again onto the street and closed the office, leaving the two dead men in the darkness within.

THE storm had developed into a hard, merciless drive of snow-choked wind and the drift was coming into the gulch almost at a horizontal angle. Kent leaned into this, passed Clayton's and his own office and paused before Ruth McKean's. Camp gossip had it that Ruth was promised to Roy Chalmers, although Kent himself was too stubborn to believe this completely. Still, it had seemed likely that he might find the engineer with Ruth now. However, the front of the restaurant was dark and he was in no mood to turn Ruth out of her quarters in back. Turning about, Kent went down again with the wind and turned into Clayton's.

The saloon was virtually empty. Ace Clayton, Medford, and most of those who had earlier been in the place, were gone. Chalmers was not among the four or five men along the bar and Kent became immediately aware that those left in the saloon were eyeing him peculiarly. The barkeep motioned to him and set a house bottle onto the bar.

"Pour a stiff one, Kent," the man counseled grimly. "You'll need it. And man, don't try to run the world by yourself. Take what's coming."

Kent frowned curiously and lifted the drink. The glass was at his lips when the door swung open. Snow and wind gusted in. A crowd came with the puff of weather with Ace Clayton at its head. Clayton came swiftly down the room, his eyes hard.

"Hold your breath, Kent!" he warned harshly. "You're not standing against two men that're looking for no trouble from you, now. You're against the whole camp and we'll cut you to pieces if you make a wrong move. Don't forget it!"

Kent stared at the saloonman. His gaze shifted to the others—Chunk Medford, Gallagher and Yeats—who with Medford and the dead Hamilton had formed the partnership working Clayton's claims. John Herrington and Gus Johnson, from the upper end of the gulch. Perhaps a dozen more—somber, hostile, determined men.

"What the hell is this, Ace?" Kent growled.

"Medford seen you on the street and guessed you were heading for Simpson's place a while ago. He knew Chalmers was down there and he was curious what was on your mind, so he doubled back and followed you. He seen the whole thing."

Kent glanced at Medford. The man returned his stare with level, challenging eyes. A premonition swept Kent, a realization that the violence against which he was bound to fight as the head of the Gregory Gulch association had suddenly reached out to trap him. And it was no accident of chance or circumstance. He had thought Chalmers was important in this affair. He saw he was wrong. There were others involved, others more powerful and more dangerous than Roy Chalmers could ever be.

"Go on, Ace," he invited the saloonman stonily.

"Maybe you'd like it written down on paper, good and plain, Kent!" Clayton growled. "All right, here it is. Medford seen you bust in on Simpson and Chalmers, just as Simpson was finishing a quick report on the sample Roy had brung down from the Golden Ruth. He seen you fill your fist with iron and force Simpson to write out another report with Chalmers standing there half scared and puzzled. Then he seen you let Simpson have it in the face without warning. Chalmers got real scared, then, didn't he? Busted out the back door like all hell. You jumped after him and let fly. It was dark and you got the wrong silhouette, first shot. You nailed Hamilton, who was just passing up the alley on his way to my place.

"That rattled you some, but you wanted Chalmers. He might talk, I reckon. So you run on out into the storm. Medford heard you fire a couple of times again out there. Then you come back alone and carried Hamilton into the office. You dumped a shot out of his gun and one out of Simpson's piece, which you took from his desk drawer. You put both guns on Simpson's table and took the first assay report Simpson had written for Chalmers and closed the door of the office.

"Medford kited up here the back way, told me about it, and a bunch of us high-tailed it to Simpson's. Bill and Hamilton are dead, all right. And likely Chalmers, off in the brush someplace. We'll have to wait till the storm dies before we can go out and find him. But we've got all we need on you right now!"

It was a tight net. Chunk Medford had lied

smoothly. And Clayton had built the lies into a damning indictment. Kent was too wise to be angry, now. Later, perhaps. But now he had need of a cool head. It was of Clayton and the partnership on his claims, it was of the sizable crew dependent upon the saloonman, that he had been thinking when he told Ruth McKean that Chalmers was asking for trouble in going so openly to the assay office. Clayton's bunch, to a man, had opposed the forming of a camp government and Kent's election. They were dangerous and this story which Medford and Clayton had built up was clever.

Jim was a little puzzled. He could not tell if the story had been designed wholly to use events and circumstances to get him out of the way or whether his own reaction to the violence at the assay office had been wrong and that this whole thing was an effort to clear the Clayton bunch of any implication in the storm-shrouded murders.

"All you need but one thing, Clayton," Jim said quietly. "What would I have against Bill Simpson or Roy Chalmers? You can't answer that."

"No?" Clayton mocked. "It's no use, Kent. We've got you. Look, as head of this fool government that's been set up, you draw two hundred dollars in dust a month. A bum working the creek below the gulch could clear more than that. It ain't reasonable that you'd be satisfied with it. So you had another reason in taking your job. I told the boys that when they elected you and now we know what that reason was.

"Chalmers hit the big vein and charted it. You know it. So do we. That made him have something any man would want. The big vein is bound to be a big one with so much float about and low-grade all around. If he was out of the way—sort of missing—you could hold his claim in trust as president of the association. Later, when things had quieted, if his body was found you'd be all set to move in on his stakes, preempting his claim. Simpson, naturally, had to be gotten out of the way because he'd assayed Roy's sample and might know something about the vein.

"You had him write out a phony report. You took the real one. And you killed him. If that ain't enough, how about the McKean gal? Maybe you walk quiet and all, but the rest of us ain't fools. We've all known you wanted her. But Chalmers was supposed to have first claim there, too. I'm satisfied with the evidence, Kent. So are most of the boys. I reckon this is one time when it don't count how you feel—"

Jim shrugged, forcing himself to quiet acceptance.

"So you're charging the marshal of your camp with a double murder. Maybe three murders, if Chalmers is found. Then what?"

"We won't wait to find Chalmers," Clayton said easily. "Two dead men is enough for this job. Since you talked so big for a miners' government, we'll use it. We're locking you up, Kent. If the snow's stopped by morning, you'll be hung proper to a tree. If it ain't, I reckon the beams in here are high enough to get your feet off the floor. And meanwhile we'll hold our court tonight to make it legal. Now—do you peel that gun off peaceable or do we skin it off you?"

Hostility had been rising in the room as Clayton's recital built up the evidence. It was now an implacable thing. Jim saw the uselessness of denials and the utter impossibility of breaking out of this with the odds stacked so heavily against him. Besides, his one road to clearing himself and discovering what had actually happened in Bill Simpson's office lay in locating Roy Chalmers.

Turning slowly, he unbuckled his belt and slid its cartridge-studded, gun-hung weight onto the bar.

CHAPTER TWO

White Death

BY MIDNIGHT the storm was at a peak of violence. Visibility outside was no more than arm's length and an incredible amount of snow was coming with the wind. The temperature had dropped steadily and trees made brittle by the intense cold were snapping on the slopes under the pressure of the wind. The men of the camp had imprisoned Kent in the little room behind his own office which had been fitted as a jail when the government was set up. He paced restlessly in its narrow confines, in part to combat his uneasiness and in part to keep somewhere near warm.

Earlier in the evening two guards had been posted in the outer room and half a dozen more hardy souls had taken up stations outside the building. The enthusiasm of these had waned in the face of the storm and after eleven o'clock, when the verdict of the hasty court sitting in Clayton's saloon had been brought down, one of the two guards in the front office had also given up and gone home. Kent could occasionally hear the other stirring beyond the stout door which separated them.

Jim had repeatedly called for his mackinaw, which hung on a peg in the outer office, but his calls had been ignored. He gauged his time and decided that further delay would gain nothing. Steeling himself against discomfort and impatience, he put a plan in motion. Since calls had failed to bring a response from his one remaining jailer, another device was necessary—a device calling for a little acrobatics

and a period of remaining utterly motionless, regardless of the cramping of the cold.

Standing in the middle of the room, he eyed distance and then leaped upward to catch one of the pole stringers which crossed under the peak of the roof. The sudden pull of his weight made the whole roof structure creak. Suspended by his hands, he thrashed his body about until the creaking became pronounced. At the same time, he forced air harshly in and out through constricted throat muscles so that the sound resembled the breathing of a man in agony. He dragged this sound out for possibly a minute, then ceased it abruptly and dropped soundlessly back to the floor.

Flattening himself against the wall on the latch side of the narrow door leading to the front office, he tensed himself to wait in complete and motionless silence.

There was no immediate reaction to his ruse. Finally he heard the guard outside move up close to the door. The man remained there for a long moment, then he spoke uncertainly through the planking.

"Kent—Jim Kent."

Jim grinned. The man outside was silent for another period, then called more loudly. Jim's silence seemed to anger him. He swore. But Jim thought there was an uneasy note even then in his voice. Finally the fellow beat loudly on the door.

"Damn you, Kent, answer me!"

A shorter silence followed. Jim heard the rattle of keys.

"By, hell, I think he's cheated us!" the voice beyond the planking muttered. A lock clicked. The door swung open. The guard stepped half into the room, raising the table lamp in his hand. Jim recognized Yeats, one of Chunk Medford's partners. And with recognition, he struck. A hard, lacing drive, full into the center of the man's face. Yeats staggered against the open door. Jim followed, ramming two more killing blows into the man's thick midsection. Yeats started down. Jim caught the lamp spilling from his hand and let him go. Ripping the guard's shirt into swift ribbons through the open front of his mackinaw, Jim thrust a wad of the rags into the fellow's mouth.

Taking the light with him, he went into the front office and locked the door to the jail. Finding a pencil stub and a sheet of paper, he hurriedly scribbled a note in a close approximation of a miner's wide, formless scrawl:

> Everything's quiet. Gone fer some coffee. Back pretty soon.
>
> Yeats.

This done, Jim unhooked his mackinaw from its peg, slid a spare gun from a drawer in his desk, and stepped out into the storm. A light was burning in the living quarters behind Ruth McKean's restaurant. This time he felt no hesitancy about disturbing her. There was, Jim thought, a wide chance that Roy Chalmers was there. If so, his search would be short and by morning Clayton's charges and Medford's substantiating lies would be without teeth.

If the engineer was not with Ruth McKean, the girl would know where he was. And there was the rest of the night in which to find the man.

Ruth answered his knock with surprising swiftness, pulling the door wide.

"I've been so worried—" she broke off suddenly, apparently only just recognizing Jim. The blankness she generally used with him slid quickly over her face. "So you've escaped," she said flatly.

"To come this far," Jim agreed. "I hope I don't have to go farther. Where's Roy?"

He thought he saw sharp concern come up momentarily in her eyes, but it fled immediately.

"Up at the Golden Ruth, I suppose," she answered easily. "That's where he said he was going."

"Then you've seen him!" Jim bit out. "The hang-tailed yellow pup! Why didn't he get down to that meeting tonight and tell the truth about what happened at Bill Simpson's place, then? What's he got against me?"

Ruth's brows went up.

"You tried to kill him this afternoon. You're free of jail, now. Maybe he was afraid of that. Maybe he was afraid you'd try to kill him again."

"You don't seem to be afraid I will," Kent growled. "You told me where to find him, quick enough."

"The storm's worse," the girl answered coolly. "I doubt if you could get through it to the mine. If you try, I'll run down to Clayton's with word that you're loose and where you going, the moment you leave!"

"If you could love like you hate—" Jim said thinly—"if you had sense enough to see the right man and the truth—" He broke off. "Better start running for Clayton's, then. I'll find Roy if I have to buck this wind clean over the peaks!"

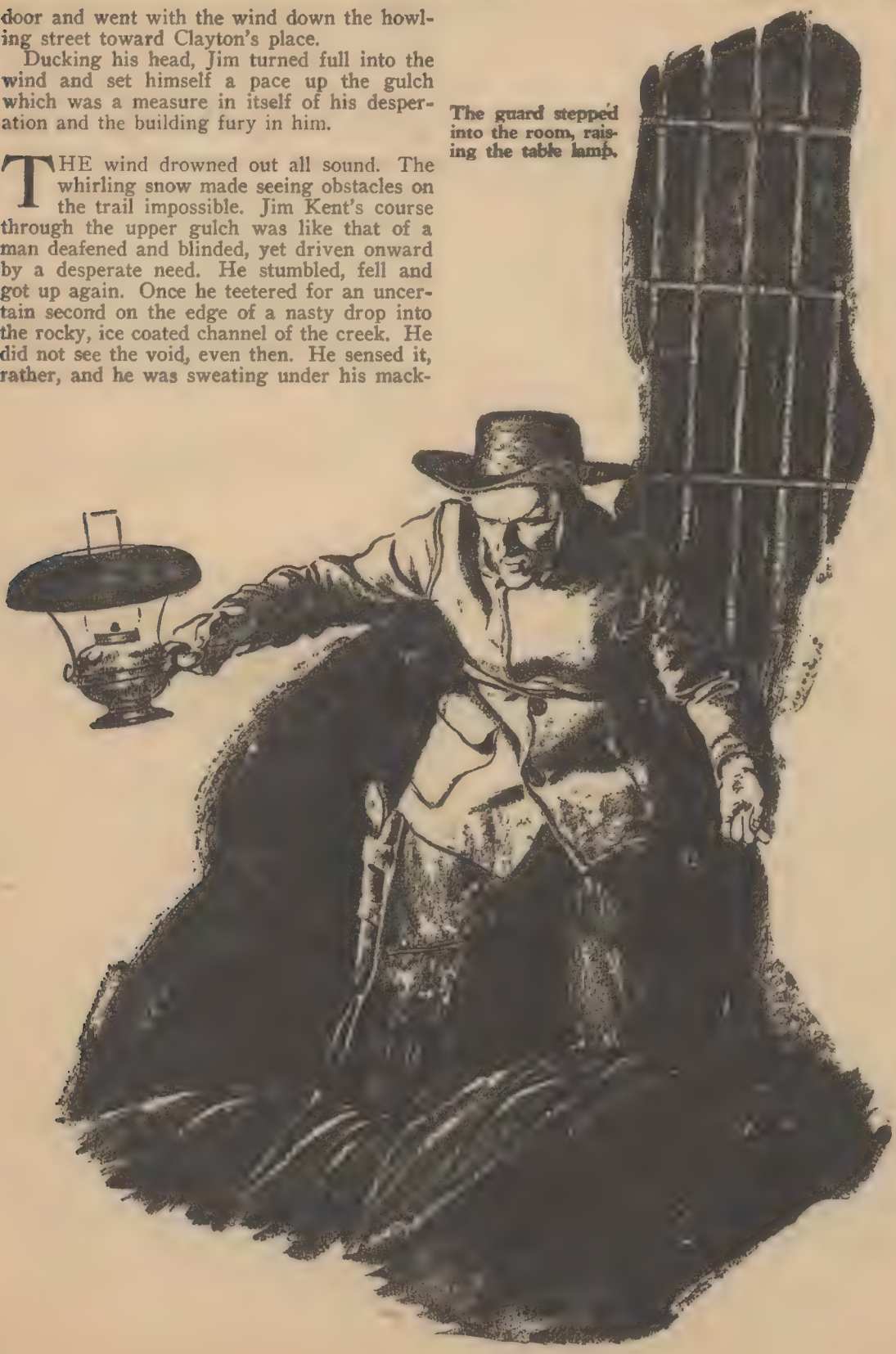
Her attitude puzzled him. He half doubted she had seen Chalmers tonight and believed she might be worried about the man because she had not. He stopped scant yards from her door, thinking that if she did not come running out to carry news of his escape down to Clayton, then Chalmers was not at the Golden Ruth and he would have to start his search for the man from the back door of Bill Simpson's death laden office.

However, a scant minute after his own departure, Ruth's muffled figure plowed out the

door and went with the wind down the howling street toward Clayton's place.

Ducking his head, Jim turned full into the wind and set himself a pace up the gulch which was a measure in itself of his desperation and the building fury in him.

THE wind drowned out all sound. The whirling snow made seeing obstacles on the trail impossible. Jim Kent's course through the upper gulch was like that of a man deafened and blinded, yet driven onward by a desperate need. He stumbled, fell and got up again. Once he teetered for an uncertain second on the edge of a nasty drop into the rocky, ice coated channel of the creek. He did not see the void, even then. He sensed it, rather, and he was sweating under his mack-



The guard stepped into the room, raising the table lamp.

inaw when he was back on better footing.

Finally he drove himself to thought in order to hold his mind from the uncertainty of the going. The thought turned to Ace Clayton—to Chunk Medford and Hamilton and Gallagher and those others who were Clayton's men in the camp or who sided with him for reasons of their own. They were the bad element, the inevitable wolves who fringed a new venture in the hills. The law, the rights of others, were not measured by them. Their own plans and their own desires were paramount and there was no limit to the means they would use to carry them out.

Clayton was mixed up in the two murders at Simpson's office. Clayton and Medford and the rest of his boys. But how much? Jim could not make up his mind. Chalmers was not of a kind with Clayton. Chalmers might be a fool and he might try to hide out, even in such a storm as this, if he were badly frightened. But Chalmers was not a murderer—only a source of information.

And there was Ruth McKean and her hostility. It had existed before Clayton had accused the marshal of Gregory Gulch of a double murder, so the dead men at the assay office were not the root of Ruth's bitterness. It might, Kent thought, have something to do with Ruth's feeling for this camp—something to do with her pride in it and her insistence that it be called a town, right from the beginning. Or it might have to do only with his own thinly veiled scorn for Roy Chalmers.

There would be loyalty in Ruth McKean. Jim had seen that from the start. And if she were actually in love with the engineer, that loyalty might breed hatred for a man who mocked him. Still, it was a flimsy base for bitterness and Jim was still stubbornly unconvinced that Chalmers had won Ruth McKean. He didn't like to think this was so.

In twenty minutes Jim fell heavily a dozen times. The last time a trailside rock banged against his forehead, splitting the skin deeply. Blood welled and congealed almost instantly in the frigid, rushing air. He lay as he had fallen for a moment, aware of the cushioning of the snow under him, and his mind shot off at another tangent.

His breath was coming raggedly. He was killing himself in this reckless effort to plow up through the storm to Chalmers' mine before the men Clayton undoubtedly had sent out after him could overtake him. And what were the odds? The thought repeated itself. What were the odds? This was none of his affair. The camp which had elected him had turned on him without giving him a chance to tell his story of what he'd found at Simpson's. What did he owe any of them? If he was out in this storm, then why wasn't he headed down canyon with the wind, eating into the miles which lay between himself and Denver? In Denver the authorities wouldn't give a damn about charges made in the hills by some local miners' government. They wouldn't give a damn for Chunk Medford's lies. They'd want proof and Clayton had no proof behind his accusations. Clayton couldn't touch him in Denver and if the camp went to hell behind him, what was the difference?

Jim climbed slowly to his feet. He couldn't answer his own question. He didn't know what the difference was, but it was there. It was driving him upgrade when he wanted to go down. It was shoving him through the storm at a pace no man could maintain. It was, he thought, something about the way a man felt about a chore he'd tackled. Something about not wanting to let go his axe till he'd cut his share of the timber. Something about promising law and order to the Gulch and wanting to see it got it.

Maybe this was what they meant, then—those who had accused him of being harder than a man had a right. Maybe this was what Ruth McKean had hated. This grimness and this inflexibility and the foreknowledge which had been with him in the afternoon when death and trouble were descending on the gulch. Jim didn't know.

The trail he was following petered out against a blank rock facing. He felt along it and came to the rough timbers of portal shoring about the mouth of a tunnel. Batted doors were hung on the shoring pillars. A hasp held them shut. This was the Golden Ruth. He moved on past the doors and came to the squat shack in which Roy Chalmers lived when he was at the mine. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. The place was cold. There was no light. He found a candle stub and touched it clumsily to flame, his stiffened fingers barely able to handle the slenderness of the match.

The shack was empty. There were no recent signs of occupancy. The stove was as cold as the air about it. The bedding was still rolled on the bed, unused. Chalmers was not here. He had not been here since his passage down the street in midafternoon. Ruth McKean had lied. She had sent him up here on this false chase for the single purpose of allowing Clayton and the others time to overtake or catch him.

Kent snuffed the candle and swore. He lifted the gun under his belt out and put it in the pocket of his mackinaw. He took off his right hand mitten and thrust this hand deep into the pocket with the gun. Quitting the cabin and with the wind at his back, he started swiftly down the trail.

It was a little hard to know just where along the trail it was that he bumped into the first man of the bunch Clayton had sent out.

It was hard to know just how many men there were in the party. Clayton's bunch were humping up the grade into the wind. Each man was head down, for the face and eyes which could stand the sawing blast of the gale coming down from the peaks did not exist. Jim's own head was bent, for looking ahead was impossible in the darkness. He had to follow ground sign.

Thus it was he collided solidly with this man. But he had his gun ready and his hand ready. He jerked the weapon out, stroked down with it, and stepped swiftly aside. The man on the trail wilted onto his face. His companions came up. As they did so, startled, alarmed and curious at the results of this blow which they had not seen, Jim Kent slid past them, a bare two or three yards from them in the storm.

The darkness solidified around them and they vanished. He had not even heard his victim cry out or the astonished shouts of those behind the fallen man. This, he supposed, was more hardness, more reason for hate in Ruth McKean's eyes.

He had struck solidly and the fallen man might be dead.

The hell with it. A man had a right to his own safety. He had a right to justice. If laws could not give it to him, if the fairness of his neighbors could not guarantee it, then hardness was a good thing.

He stopped thinking.

The wind at his back was a strong pressure. Going down, even then, was harder than the ascent up the gulch had been. With that force behind him, a man traveled faster and he had to watch more closely for obstacles and barriers. He had to watch more closely —when the best eyes in the world could not see a yard away!

Jim had been swearing intermittently, stumbling, rolling, stumbling on again, when he suddenly realized that the track under his feet had leveled. He veered a little to the left and sensed the looming silhouette of a building. Caution snapped down tight on him. He had reached the upper end of the camp. Holding to the center of the street and crouching a little, he jogged into a swift trot. There was still a light in Ruth McKean's living quarters. And when he passed Clayton's Saloon he thought a man was on the walk, peering into the storm. He thought he might have been seen, but it didn't seem to make much difference. The wind was at his back. He could not be caught.

And somewhere down below the assay office —maybe deep in the hills or just a little way down the canyon—he'd find the man for whom he was looking. He'd find Roy Chalmers if he had to track him blind to the everlasting gates of hell.

CHAPTER THREE

Coyote Song

THE next hour was a void of rushing sound and a smothering blanket of unseen snow. Kent felt a numbness in his exposed cheeks and his feet were lumps of wood in his boots. His ungloved hand, which he had thrust into a pocket of his mackinaw, along with his gun, had stiffened and was aching steadily. He shoved his gun back under his belt, restored his mitten to his hand, and thrust mitten and all back into the mackinaw pocket to thaw the frost in his fingers before it penetrated too deep.

He was, he knew, still on the floor of the canyon, somewhere below the gulch. In spite of the thrusting wind at his back he did not think he had covered too much ground. The going was too slow underfoot and he had been watching as best he could, hoping to sense the opening in the canyon where a steep side draw slanted down into it. He had thought that if Roy Chalmers wanted to hole up in the hills, he would probably take this draw. There were some old shacks toward its head and possibly a prospector who might have food and a fire burning. He had thought he would turn up this draw and climb up to the shacks. There was no tracking a man on this kind of night and one had to go by hunches.

Every time he stumbled and fell one part of his mind shouted that Medford or Gallagher or whichever one of Clayton's boys had actually killed Bill Simpson likely had killed Chalmers, too. Alive, Chalmers was a barrier between Clayton's bunch and possession of the Golden Ruth and the course of the big vein, if that was what the saloon crowd wanted.

But every time he got back onto his feet, an inner compulsion drove him on, an inexplicable conviction that he was following the right course. A certainty that Roy Chalmers was out here, somewhere, that he was alive, that he could be found. Jim made no attempt to find explanation for this. Thought was difficult under the buffeting of the storm.

Doubts tormented him, failing confidence in his ability to keep himself located, but eventually he was aware of a feeling of more space about him, of a widening of the canyon, and he knew he had reached the point where the slanting draw came in. A sheer stand of rock wall flanked one side of this confluence and an eddying pocket of quieter air hung under this wall. Jim stumbled into it, suddenly aware that he had been driving himself too hard and that a man's body was not built to cope with the savagery of a full mountain blizzard.

Out of the full force of the wind, his senses seemed to sharpen. Realization of his folly in

even considering the climb to the top of the slanting draw struck him with a sick rush. And immediately on the heels of this came the realization that Roy Chalmers would not have climbed to the shacks above, either. Not even if he were out of his head or traveling in mortal terror. Chalmers had a trained mind and although he might not know the mountains completely he would have sense enough to avoid trying the impossible.

Jim hunkered down, feeling warmer out of the blast of the wind. His mind went back to the things he had thought on his way up to the Golden Ruth shortly after midnight. He had thought that if he had to be out in this devil's gale, he ought to be traveling down the canyon with the wind at his back—down canyon toward Denver and escape from the whole mess at the gulch. Suddenly he realized this was what any sane man would think. This is what Roy Chalmers would think.

Regardless of why Chalmers had quit the camp—whether in fear or for some curious reason of his own—the man would have to head for Denver. Otherwise there would have been no reason in quitting the gulch in the first place. Not in this kind of weather. If Chalmers were alive—if he had not been cut down up in the gulch and his body hidden by the storm—then he was still ahead, still on down the Denver trail. He was fighting the wind and the cold and the snow as Jim had been fighting it. He was stopping occasionally under an overhang like this to rest and measure what still faced him. But he was headed for the outside. This certainty eased Jim. He stood up and tightened the folds of his coat at his neck, ready to step out into the blast again. And as he did so, a low oath sounded, close at hand.

"Kent! The devil!"

Jim wheeled. Another man had been crouching at the far end of the wall under which he had taken shelter. A man he had not seen but who had now crept close. Jim squatted, staring hard. A face half buried in a snowy mackinaw collar shaped before him, a narrow, white face with brilliant eyes and a peculiarly set, savage expression. Jim did not recognize Roy Chalmers for a long moment.

"I didn't count on you, Kent," Chalmers said harshly. "I didn't figure you in. I didn't think anybody could follow me that fast or that anybody could unravel what I left behind in time to get on my trail. Not in this storm. It's too bad you did, Kent—too bad!"

Relief swept Jim. Relief and a gust of anger that this man had run out.

"What the hell's eating you, Roy?" he demanded. "You left me in a devil of a mess—"

He broke off. Chambers had opened his coat. His hand came out of it, naked and holding a heavy gun. The muzzle tipped upward. Jim watched it, fascinated. Chalmers was the man he had said had no sand. He had judged from the beginning that Chalmers would do no gun work. Chalmers had a quick head and he'd find a safer way to reach an end than through violence. Yet Chalmers was going to shoot him. The realization percolated through Jim slowly. Then, when the engineer's fingers were already whitening on the grip of the gun, Jim flung himself clumsily forward.

The gun fired. Jim smelled it. And he took a hard jolting somewhere in the body. The jolting did not hurt. He wasn't crippled. He just felt a blow, that was all. The gun fired again and flame stabbed past Jim's head. After that he was tight against Chalmers, his arms encircling the engineer's hard, wiry body. Mackinaws and mittens were not made for fighting. Jim felt ridiculously clumsy. But he bore Chalmers to the ground and the two of them thrashed there.

Chalmers had always maintained a haughty mildness in the camp but he fought like a tiger now. Kent was startled. He had always thought of the engineer as lightly built yet this man with whom he was tightly locked in struggle was as hard of body as himself. And he fought with a sort of wild frenzy which made him difficult to match and very dangerous.

No tangle between two men already winded and weakened by fighting a storm like the one afoot in this canyon could last long. One moment Jim was fighting grimly for a chance to clamp a throttling grip on Chalmers' throat and was taking bitter punishment in his midsection because he could not defend himself there at the same time. The next moment the weight of Chalmers' blows began to fade and Jim knew the man was breaking up, that there'd be no need to throttle him into submission. He lowered his hands, came to his knees, and as Chalmers came unsteadily up into a similar position, Jim hit him twice, hard, in the face. Chalmers went down, and when Jim jerked him up again, he made no move to defend himself further.

THE brilliance was gone from his eyes and the peculiar pinched tenseness from his face. Aside from his battered lips, he looked as he had when Jim last saw him on the street of the gulch. A sour, stiff-necked, uncommunicative outlander who would never be a part of any community in these hills.

"You'd better start talking, I think—" Jim said roughly.

Chalmers looked him straight in the face. A dull kind of look, without fear but stubborn. Too stubborn.

"Talk, I said!" Jim growled. "What the devil is this?"

Chalmers made no answer. Jim slapped him across the cheek with the heavy heel of his hand.

"Talk!"

Color came up in the bruised cheek. A touch of fire flickered in the engineer's eyes. But he didn't speak. Jim's anger mounted. He hit with closed fingers, this time, too far forward to stun but hard enough to hurt. Chalmers' head rocked. His tongue touched his lips. But he kept his jaw stubbornly clamped.

"There's a rope waiting for my neck at the gulch," Jim said. "You can cut it down and, by hell, you will. You'll talk if I have to cut you to pieces, one punch at a time. You'd better start, Roy!"

Chalmers considered this. Suddenly the stubbornness ran out of him.

"All right," he said. "I missed my pass when I let anybody overtake me. I knew from the beginning I'd have to get out ahead of pursuit or I'd be done. I guess whatever happens now doesn't mean much. I hit the big vein in the Golden Ruth early yesterday morning."

"I know that!" Jim snapped impatiently. "Get along with the rest of it. What happened at Simpson's?"

"That's coming," Chalmers said quietly. "I'm not the same kind as you and some of the others, Kent. I've got no flint on the outside. With me it's all here—" he stabbed a thumb against his chest. "I knew that when I hit the big vein there'd be somebody —Clayton or his like—would have my shaft. And I knew that when I hit good rock I wouldn't be able to keep it secret. So I started planning a long time ago.

"I waited for the storm to begin before I headed for town. Then I came down the middle of the street, in the open so I'd be seen. I didn't need an assay on the sample I carried. I knew what was in it and within a few points of the way it would grade. But Simpson was a part of my plan. So was Clayton's bunch. I saw one of them—Medford, I think it was—watching me from the street just below the saloon. I knew he'd get help. I worked fast once I got to Simpson's."

"I gave Bill a piece of rock off my dump, standard low-grade, such as you can pick up anywhere in the gulch. He recognized it and told me it wasn't worth writing a report on. I insisted. He was a little sore, I think. He wrote the report fast. Then I showed him the sample from the big vein. I had to. I had to have his judgment on top of my own. Vanity, maybe. Wanting to show off. Wanting to make sure I really had it. I didn't know. Anyway, it was enough for me when I saw his eyes. I shot him, then, while he sat there holding my sample. That way nobody in camp could know for sure what I'd found. And to make even guessing uncertain, I tore the next sheet on Bill's report pad off and shoved it into my pocket. If a report was missing—"

"If a report was missing it would cross everything up," Jim cut in. "We wouldn't be able to figure out where you fitted and where you had gone. We'd think you'd gotten your report from Simpson and he'd been killed after you left."

Chalmers nodded wearily.

"Yes. I figured it would work that way. I plowed out Bill's back door in a hurry, then. I'd seen you at Ruth's as I came down and I was afraid that you'd follow me. All of the time I was afraid of only one thing, Kent, and you were it. I kept telling Ruth you were hard, a bad kind who made bucking a camp your profession, and that you'd run it your way and make your profit with the law behind you. I think she believed me, but I never fooled myself. I knew you'd run the camp like you'd work a claim—according to the rules. I knew you'd let nothing stop you so long as you were right. But I figured it would take you longer to untangle the mess at Simpson's than it did."

"I had nothing untangled before you started talking," Jim said quietly. "You've got out Simpson's back door now. I found Hamilton, one of Clayton's boys, drilled center, just outside that door."

"I thought I'd have Clayton fooled along with you. I hadn't known he'd work so fast, once he was sure I'd located the main vein. Medford and Hamilton were coming up to the back door as I ran out. Both turned and started to run. I must have hurried, for I'd been practising this kind of shooting for weeks, back in the tunnel of the Golden Ruth. I missed both of them on the first try. I got Hamilton, but by that time Medford had ducked back onto the street and was running up it toward Clayton's."

"Yes," Jim agreed. "He passed me a couple of minutes later, almost to the saloon. I was on my way down to see Simpson and you—"

"But you were too late, Kent," Chalmers said. "Too bad you couldn't have been too late here, too. But I had to rest. I had to be careful. I'd gone this far. I had to get on to Denver."

"Why?" Jim countered. "You could have made a fortune out of the Golden Ruth. And there wasn't only the mine. How about Ruth? I never figured you'd be running clear out because I didn't think you'd leave her—"

Chalmers shrugged.

"A man has to make choices. Why should I stay in the gulch and run a mine? I hated that damned camp. And when I'd uncovered the vein, it wasn't too hard for me to see

where it ran. Not anywhere near the place most everybody had figured. Not up through the filed claims at all. It appeared to follow another fault and the ground over that wasn't filed.

"If I'd have gotten to Denver I'd have filed claim notices I've got in my pocket on everything I was sure that vein ran under, using Ruth's name and my name. Once those were filed, I could take a sample of the ore and my sketches of the vein and sell the whole works out to speculators at a profit that would keep me comfortable some place a hell of a long ways from these mountains."

"And when you were settled you could send for Ruth?"

"I could, but she wouldn't come, Kent. That was the one trouble between us. She figures these mountains are hers."

Jim stood up and gestured with Chalmers' recovered gun for the man to do likewise. Chalmers shook his head and grinned crookedly.

"You think I'd sing like a coyote if I figured I was going any place else, Kent?" he asked. "No. My dice are cocked and I don't have another throw coming."

The man stirred a little, laboriously opening his heavy coat. Bending, Kent saw that his inner jacket and shirt were thick with congealed blood. There was a huge, ragged wound just under his ribs.

"I thought I had you through the belly with my first shot when you jumped me a while ago, Kent," he said unsteadily. "But you must have hide like iron. The damn thing ricocheted off you to get me—here—"

Jim thought of the impact he had felt as he charged Chalmers. He dragged his own coat open. It was torn in one place and there was a dark lead splash on the cylinder of the gun thrust in his belt under it. He shifted the gun and felt a bruised soreness in the belly muscles under it. Chalmers coughed shallowly and swore.

"Your gun, eh?" he murmured. "I should have remembered no man could be as rough and tough as I persuaded Ruth you were." Chalmers paused. A flicker of amusement crossed his face. "Think you can talk her out of it, Kent?"

"I can sure as hell try."

Jim broke off. Chalmers had pitched suddenly and silently forward onto his face.

THE storm began to die shortly after dawn. Kent felt its pressure easing against him as he slogged back up the canyon.

He had Bill Simpson's missing assay form in his pocket, a form which was blank. He had the sample of high grade ore Chalmers had been carrying with him to Denver. He had Chalmers' gun and the claim notices in the engineer's name and in Ruth McKean's, which Chalmers had intended to file and then sell, when he was down out of the hills.

These were things which would, with careful explanation, clear him with me like Pop Ward and the boys from the high claims. He could, he thought, make them see the narrow and merciless side of Roy Chalmers which he had himself not seen while the engineer was among them in the camp. He might even be able to make Ruth understand what had happened. But papers and a repetition of Chalmers' story would accomplish nothing with Ace Clayton and his bunch.

Snow was still falling when Kent slogged stiffly into the lower end of the street at the gulch. But the wind was down to moderation and the flakes were no longer dry and fine and ice hard. They were drifting down almost vertically—huge, wet incredibly white feathers in the air.

Smoke was coming from the tin pipe over Ruth's restaurant stove and there was some stir at Clayton's as he cut off the street and into the fringe of the timber. Bypassing the camp, he swung back onto the canyon trail above the cluster of buildings. The tracks of a number of men were in the snow ahead of him. Directly they quit the main track and cut off to the right toward the slope under which Roy Chalmers had driven his tunnel.

He came up on the Golden Ruth cautiously. The stove in Chalmer's shack was going. The sound of voices came from it. But tracks in the snow indicated that the majority of the party which had come up from the camp had gone into the opened tunnel. He could hear men within, how far back he couldn't tell. He eyed the doors with which Chalmers had fitted the tunnel mouth. Snow had gathered between them since they had been opened but he thought they would swing shut easily enough. He glanced at the shack, a dozen yards away, decided he'd have to risk being seen, and broke from cover. Half a dozen long, reaching strides carried him to the tunnel doors. He seized them and swung them shut.

As they banged together a man shouted within the tunnel. The door of the shack rattled as it was flung back. Jim snapped the hasp on the mine doors over its staple. Chalmers' lock was gone. He glanced quickly about for a pin to thrust through the staple. A man was shouting at the shack, now. The need was for haste. Reaching within his coat, Jim snagged Chalmers' gun and thrust it muzzle-first through the huge staple. It held the hasp snugly. Wheeling, he leaped into a full run toward the shack.

Almost at the same instant, a man fired from the front stoop of the makeshift build-

ing. The shot was a little short and flung powdered snow up into Kent's eyes. Reaching for an instant of time, Kent dove head foremost into the snow and rolled enough to bring his face clear of the drift. He shook his head. Clayton and Chunk Medford had been on the stoop. Jim judged it had been Medford who fired, for the man was now down from the stoop in a full, elated run toward the place his supposed victim had sprawled in the snow.

Clayton called out guardedly and Medford pulled up.

"Yeah, it's Kent, all right!" he called over his shoulder. "Devil only knows how he got here or where he's been all night. I don't know whether I got him or not—"

Clayton barked some advice and at the same time Kent came back up out of the snow with his own gun ready. Medford fired at the first sign of movement. Clayton shifted on the stoop of the shack and fired also. Both men tallied—Jim felt the double drive of lead into him but the feeling was detached and without hurt. He fired at Medford's silhouette against the bright background of the snow.

The man staggered but did not go down. Jim swore and fired again with an impersonal, mechanical care. Medford turned clumsily and started back for the shack. He broke in two in his second stride and went down loosely. Clayton had snapped another shot from the stoop and then ducked back to the interior of the shack in the face of Jim's steady advance.

Jim had no intention of plowing into the flimsy, single-room shelter while Clayton was waiting for him. He tried to remember how the inside of the room was. When he thought he had it in his mind, he raised his gun and emptied it at rapid fire, swinging the muzzle with each shot so that he flung a crashing slug through the thin clapboard walls into every portion of the room in which he thought Clayton could have taken shelter.

Throwing down his empty gun as useless, he staggered ahead. The scant yards to the shack door seemed to have stretched out to an interminable distance. He knew he was moving so slowly and erratically that he was a sitting duck target for Clayton, through a window, if the saloonman was still on his feet inside.

The ground was tilting crazily. And there were other hallucinations. He could hear Ruth McKean, clearly and distinctly, calling to him:

"Jim—Jim Kent! You fool—you crazy, reckless fool! Wait—" The last of her cry became a part of the rushing wind.

Jim knew the calling was a trick of his mind. There was a tone in Ruth's voice that he had never heard before, that he had given over ever expecting to hear. It was without hostility—and it was this that convinced him.

He lifted his foot onto the stoop of the shack and missed the step. Quick hands caught his arm. He was steered through the open door. He had a confused impression of the glowing stove, littered with soot on one side from a hole in the stovepipe which one of his searching shots had punched. He thought there was a man lying in one corner with his face to the floor. There was a bunk on the near wall. Somehow it slid under him. He closed his eyes.

HE HELD them shut long enough to steady his senses. But when he opened them again he realized it had been longer than he had thought. Pop Ward and Gus Johnson, the miner from the upper claims, were in the room. They were talking about whether a miner's court should be convened here at the Golden Ruth to try the men imprisoned in the tunnel or whether the prisoners should be marched back to the camp for trial. They had not settled the matter when they went outside to talk to others in the yard. Jim turned his head.

Ruth McKean was fussing with a pot on Chalmers' stove. She heard Jim's movement and crossed quickly to him. He started to speak. She bent swiftly.

"Not now," she warned. "You need rest."

Jim's questions must have been alive in his eyes. To his wonder the girl smiled.

"I was looking out the window and saw you when you switched from the lower end of the street to the timber to circle the town. I told Pop. We thought you'd be coming here. We turned out some of the rest and followed. We didn't get here quite quick enough. You'd finished it for us."

She paused.

"The rest of it too, I guess," she went on. "I went through your pockets while Pop was dressing up those holes in you. I found enough to make me see what fools we'd all been, Jim. I knew Roy Chalmers pretty well, and I knew there was a dark side to him I always tried not to see. It was in the things he said about you—but he was right, too. He said you'd always finish a job, no matter how."

"A job and a couple of other things," he murmured. Then he looked up. "Or maybe it's all the same."

Ruth McKean looked startled; then slowly she colored. Finally she found words again.

"And I was part of it? Then I'll tell you something. I can't run a kitchen without a good hard steel knife. I don't think I could run my life without a man with the same kind of steel. I made a mistake about that, but I'll not make it again. I think, if you want it that way, you'll have two jobs to do in this camp from here on out, Jim Kent—"

"He's a man who'll shoot from the back—an' that's a sign of yellow. . . ."

BOOTHILL'S BOY

II

Dave Shemp was all his life learning this lesson—a man who steals a coward's name may win a hero's grave!

By

D. B. NEWTON

SOMEONE had stuck up a signpost with a board nailed on it, and words were burned into the board with a hot running iron. Someone else had kicked down that board, thrown it into the brush. Dave Shemp waded in now, tore away the creepers that were already beginning to wind their tentacles about the board and read the crude, charred letters: RUSTLERS, TAKE WARNING!

He straightened slowly, raised his head to run a leaden stare over that forsaken scene—the burned cabin, the desolation, the two shallow, unmarked graves. This had once been his home. Here old Tom Shemp had raised three motherless boys in the same practical, rule of

thumb and kindly manner in which he lived his own life. Two of the boys had ridden away years ago—one had stayed behind. And now the third son and his father lay here, dead and forgotten, side by side.

Dave reached cold fingers to drag off his sweat-streaked Stetson; dropped his arm again without it, scarcely aware of what he did. That old feeling of inadequacy was riding him again, for here was a wrong that cried out for vengeance—

As usual then he thought of Bob, his oldest brother. "Cougar" Shemp, the world called Bob now. He could do anything—anything at all. It would have been a different story if it were he and not Dave standing here. . . .

Dave shrugged heavily, cursing his own weakness. He went back to his waiting claybank. Old Jeff Mallon's small spread lay another dozen miles westward along the fresh-running course of the Verde. Mounting, he headed for it. Old Jeff was one of the real old-timers of the Verde range—one of the few who would remember that Tom Shemp had had three sons.

The Mallon place, in late afternoon sunlight, was about as he remembered it: a small spread, with neat buildings and good saddle stock in the feedlot. And he knew old Jeff at once, as he quartered downslope between barn and corral and his claybank brought him around in front of the little house. Jeff was out on the porch steps, a slight figure of a man with hair gone white and eyes more dim and puckered than in the old days. But Dave didn't know Jeff's visitors.

There were three of these, sitting saddle before the door on stamping, restless horses. The animals all wore an anchor brand; and the men were alike, too. They had tied-down guns on their hips and they looked capable of using them.

One of the three—a big man with heavy beard and black mustache—was speaking as Dave Shemp came into the dooryard; he had a voice that carried well.

"I'm a patient gent, Mallon," the big man was saying, anger edging his words. "I know an iron the size of Anchor can expect to have the small fry picking at its edges—doing a little slow-elking, helping theirselves to a steer now and then. But when it goes too far I move—and then it's too bad for them that misjudged how much of that sort of thing I'd take!"

Slight and unarmed as he was, there was no fear in Jeff Mallon's sharp answer. "Nate Garson, you know damn well I've never touched a head of Anchor beef, or any other man's stock that didn't belong to me! But now you've started spreading your lying talk about me—and some day likely they'll find my place burnt and my body waitin' for somebody to come along and bury it."

Big Garson's face was dark. "I don't know what you're talkin' about!"

"No? I'm talkin' about the grass you took over when Tom Shemp and his boy was killed. I'm talkin' about Hammerhead Springs, that you've been hankering to get from me ever since you rode onto Verde Range with your gun crew and started building yourself an empire. You'll overdo it some day, Garson. You'll spread yourself too thin and then—"

His words fell off, silence dropping like a blanket as they all noticed Dave Shemp for the first time. There was a dangerous quality in that silence, a total lack of welcome. One of the men with Nate Garson let his hand drop slowly until it was resting lightly on a gun handle. Suddenly his voice rapped out in flat, impatient warning.

"That's plenty close, stranger! We're discussing private business. You better swing wide and ride elsewhere."

Dave drew rein carefully. He said, "I heard the name of Shemp mentioned—"

Jeff Mallon was staring at Dave, faded eyes gone wide with astonishment. "Cougar!" he stammered out, then. "Cougar Shemp!"

THE riders stiffened sharply at that, a wary respect coming into their eyes as they stared at Dave.

Old Jeff exclaimed triumphantly, "Maybe you didn't know that was his dad and brother you killed—or you might have thought twice before you done it!"

Dave Shemp knew a moment of consternation. It was years since old Jeff had seen either Dave or Bob, and now his age-dimmed eyes had mistaken Dave for his older brother—had confused the unspectacular Dave with Cougar Shemp! He shook his head quickly, a protest on his lips. But he let the words go unsaid.

For a startling change had come over Nate Garson and his men. The one that challenged Dave with hand on gun had jerked his fingers away as though the walnut grips were suddenly red hot. Garson himself swallowed once, put out a narrow tongue and ran it over dry lips.

"So you're the great Cougar!" he grunted with a forced bluster. "You don't look so tough. Why, there's a man on my payroll that I'd be willing to stack up against even you, Shemp! Maybe you've heard of him—the Pima Kid?"

Dave shrugged. "Can't say I have," he muttered. He thought: *You damned fool, don't play into this cold deck pot!* And yet he sensed that this was not the time to correct old Jeff's error—not now, with Garson backing down, cowed by the power of a mere name.

Jeff Mallon was saying, loudly, "The Pima

Kid is a gun-fast killer, maybe, but he's also a man who'll shoot from the back—the way he killed Tom and Harry Shemp. And Garson, that's the sure sign of a yellow streak. We got a man on this range now."

Nate Garson turned on Dave. "Come around any day you feel like it. We'll either use you or"—he let the rest of the sentence hang. Then he jerked a nod at his riders, grunted, "We got no time to talk. Let's be going!"

Jeff waited cautiously until they were out of sight in the trees, away downslope, and the sound of their going had thinned out in the afternoon haze. After that he was down the steps at a bound, his blue-veined hand seizing Dave's arm, his seamed face lighted with ecstatic joy. "Bob!" he cried. "Dammit, I knew you'd come—you and Dave too. What'd you do, see the piece I ran in the Verde *Times?"*

A brief notice it had been, in the personal column of an issue already months old when Dave picked it up in a hotel lobby hundreds of miles away. *Bob and Dave: Have information about your late father and brother. J.M.* The wording of the message had struck like a sudden blow; for though Dave had tried to keep in touch with news from home, this was the first hint of trouble—the knowledge that it was over.

Jeff smiled grimly. "I had to be mighty careful how I worded the ad, because the new editor is a friend of Nate Garson's. But I didn't think many folks here remember Harry Shemp's two other sons, and I reckoned that if either of you saw it, the notice would tell you enough to bring you kitin' back. You'd know who 'J.M' was, too. Damn, but I'm glad you made it, Bob!"

Dave swallowed. "Now, look, Jeff. . . ."

The oldster wasn't listening. He was calling over his shoulder, "Edie! They're gone now. Come on out—I got a surprise for you."

A moment later a slight figure in overalls was running from the barn, denimed legs flashing, a heavy rifle balanced in one hand. Dave Shemp came down from the saddle in quick confusion. He saw brown eyes, dark curls with straw tangled in them.

He heard Jeff's voice, "Edie, this is Bob Shemp—Cougar Shemp! They'll be a different tune called in these parts, now!" He added, "Bob, you never knew Edie, did you? She's my brother's girl—been stayin' with me since he died a couple of years back. A real helper, too! That rifle would have given Garson a hot reception—"

She was small, coming only to Dave's shoulder. She halted now, breathing a little fast and let the rifle butt down into the dust as her brown eyes moved slowly from Dave to her uncle.

"Bob Shemp?" she repeated.

Old Jeff went to her excitedly, his trembling hands tightening on her slim shoulders. "Ain't it wonderful, Edie? He finally got my message! He's come back to pay Nate Garson for what he done to Bob's brother and dad—and to free Verde range from Garson's ambition. You've heard plenty about Cougar Shemp, ain't you, girl? About what a ring-tailed hellion he is with a six-gun?"

PAST her uncle's shoulder Dave saw a queer look pass over the face of the girl; saw her mouth harden, her brown eyes clouding as they turned upon him. He read the look and thought he understood it. To this girl, apparently, Cougar Shemp was no hero at all, but only a ruthless killer. She would not even acknowledge the introduction.

There was a sullen tone in her voice. "Supper's on the stove. If it hasn't burned up we'll eat in a few minutes."

She despised him, then, or—what was worse—despised the image of the brother that Dave had always worshipped. But how much lower would her opinion be if she knew the truth—that Dave was too much a coward to set Jeff straight, that he wasn't averse to wearing an unearned glory. The thought shamed him, but he could not bring himself to set the old man right.

It was worst when, toward the end of the meal, Jeff Mallon started reminiscing over his coffee cup about the days that were gone. The old man said suddenly, "Ever hear from your brother Dave, Bob? It must be seven years since he went away. You know, I always had an idea that boy had a lot more in him than people knew—more'n he guessed himself, even. But he was the youngest of you three boys, and somehow I think he got the notion he didn't quite stack up, till he was afraid even to try. . . ."

Dave Shemp blundered to his feet, one knee bumping the table and setting tinware rattling. He couldn't look at Jeff, or at Edie Mallon. All of a sudden he felt he had to get away from there—away from that voice that stabbed home with every word.

Jeff put down his cup, dim eyes staring. "What's the matter, Bob?"

"I—I got to be going, Jeff," Dave muttered.

Edie turned from the stove, sizzling fry pan forgotten in her hands. With their eyes on him Dave Shemp shoved past the table, got his hat from a hook on the wall, got the door open.

Jeff was on his feet suddenly, bitter disappointment showing in his eyes. "You ain't —leavin'?"

The door's closing shut away the picture.

Striding through darkness toward the barn, Dave thought, *Why didn't you tell him then? Don't just walk out. . . .* But he couldn't go back and face them again.

A tin lantern burned in the shed. By its light Dave got blanket and saddle and slapped them on his claybank, which was finishing a feed of oats in the stall. Neither Jeff nor the girl came out to interfere; but when he had the tree cinched on and was riding away past the cabin, Dave saw the door open quickly and Edie Mallon's slim shape silhouetted in the opening.

She called out after him, but he set his glance ahead and went on, not letting himself look at her. He ticked the bronc with spurs, lifted it into a canter that quickly took him out of the ranchyard; and then the lighted buildings had dropped away behind him and he was alone in the starry night, the Verde slipping between brushy banks near at hand.

Dave pressed his bronc impatiently, following the river until it took him into the town that shared its name. A heavy mood prodded him, weighed him down. Today he had failed himself, and he had failed Jeff Mallon and the memory of old Tom Shemp.

For just a moment he found comfort in the thought that some one day the real Cougar might see the notice in the paper and, like himself, come back. But the comfort was short-lived, and the bad taste came to his mouth again.

What his brother Bob might do could not erase Dave Shemp's defeat; for that defeat was inside himself. The blood of two murdered men cried to him from lonely, brush-choked graves—and he had no answer.

He knew—had always known—that what Jeff Mallon said of him was true. There was nothing fundamentally wrong with him—he had ability; he was even handy with a gun. He was not a coward. But somehow he had developed a habit of defeat and it seemed as though he would never be able to break that.

He rode through Verde's lamp-splashed streets, noting the changes that had come in his years away. One spot of light and noise was the big Red Bull saloon. As Dave passed it he suddenly glimpsed, by lamp glow from its windows, the Anvil brand on a couple of horses at the tie-rack there. And he recognized the big, heavy barreled roan as the bronc Nate Garson had ridden that afternoon.

WHAT he did then he never fully understood. Some perverse instinct made him haul rein, nose his claybank to the rail and step down. Some inner voice prodded him. *Here's the test. Walk in there and buy a drink; and if Garson sees you—don't let him make you back down!*

He knew all at once that if he failed this one time more, there was no hope for him.

Garson was at the bar, right enough, having a beer with another man. The Anvil boss set his schooner down sharply as he caught sight of Dave. He sleeved foam from a drooping mustache, spoke quietly to the man next to him and the latter turned with a slow, deliberate motion.

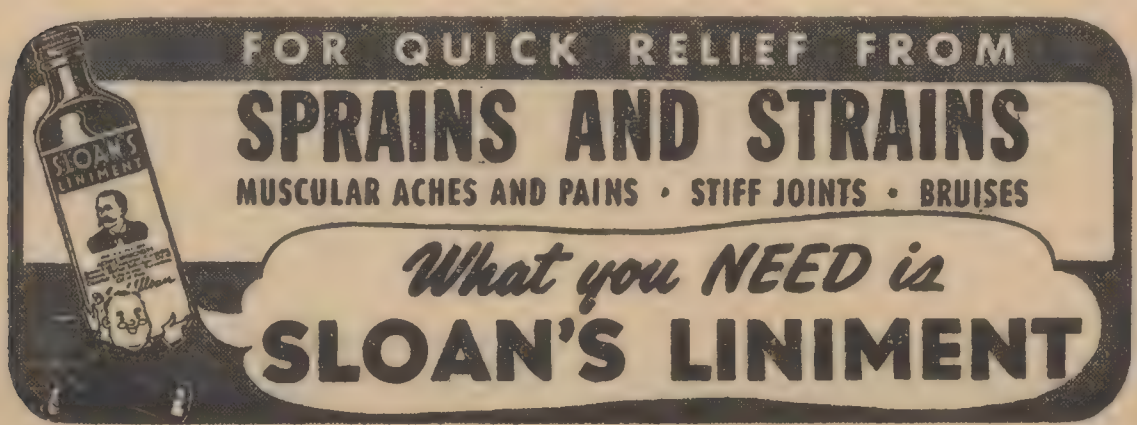
This was a wiry, loose-hung individual, with a leashed energy gleaming behind his eyes, and hands that looked as though they would fit easily over the gun butts in his tied-down holsters. Dave knew at once that this was the Pima Kid. And he knew that coming here had been a very foolish thing.

Forcing a stony calm into his features he turned to the bar and gave his order. He took the drink slowly, tasting it, letting his eye run casually over the tawdry colors of the room reflected in the long bar mirror. Afterward, still moving with studied casualness, he paid for his drink and started for the swinging door.

On the steps outside they caught up with him.

"Just a minute, Shemp."

Dragging in a resigned breath, Dave turned slowly. The three of them were alone here, but the racket of the saloon poured out constantly and plenty of light came from the big windows. The light glinted sharply in the Pima Kid's eyes as he stood, a little crouched, his elbows spread and lifted.



The Kid said, "I know what I'm talking about, Nate! He looks something like Cougar Shemp—but it ain't him!"

Nate Garson's stare was like acid eating into Dave Shemp's face. "All right," he grunted. "Start talking! What's the idea?"

Dave licked at lips gone suddenly dry; forgotten were all the firm resolves of a moment ago. He flicked a glance at his bronc down at the rail, figuring his chances of getting to it and away.

Nate Garson spoke again, his tone harsh and impatient. "I'm speakin' to you, mister!"

Dave said, "I never said I was Cougar Shemp," he pointed out lamely. "Jeff Mallon made a mistake."

"But you never set him straight!" Garson retorted. He turned to the Pima Kid. "Must be another relative of those two Shemps you planted for me, Kid. A big family!"

The gunman smiled, thinly. "Looks like another yella coward, too—just like his brother. Reason I knew he wasn't Cougar, I had a run-in with that blowhard once. He turned tail and run. Never had nerve enough to brace me again."

Dave Shemp's anger was suddenly greater than his fear. It rushed to the surface, boiled over.

"You're lying!"

Then the Pima Kid was driving both hands downward toward waiting gun handles, in a blur of speed. Dave Shemp started for his own weapon—with terrifying slowness, it seemed to him. He had barely cleared leather when the Pima Kid's first shot thundered.

Lead pounded into Dave, drove him back hard against a pole holding up the porch roof. Teeth gritted against the sickening pain of it, he faced the Pima Kid through acrid powder-smoke and somehow found the strength to drag his gun up into line.

A startled look flicked across the Kid's eyes. He pulled trigger again, but this time he fired too quickly and the slug went wide, was lost somewhere in the shadows of the street.

Patiently, Dave Shemp battled his own weakness and the weight of the gun dragging at his fist. He made himself wait until the weapon was in line, the shot sure to be good. He remembered, suddenly, what old Jeff Mallon had said about this man he faced.

He's a man who'll shoot from the back—an' that's a sign of a yellow streak. . . .

All at once the Pima Kid's twin guns were roaring in a wild roll of thunder, but not a slug touched Dave Shemp. Then Dave pulled trigger three times, deliberately. Once for his dad—once, for Harry. And the third bullet—for Cougar Shemp.

One of the Kid's guns clattered down the steps into the dust. He fell loosely, rolled over at Dave's feet. There were frightened yells from the saloon, the plunging of horses at the hitch-rail. A rifle cracked suddenly, sharply, out in the dark street. . . .

"Got him, Dave!" old Jeff's voice cried triumphantly, and Dave looked in time to see Nate Garson reel and buckle to the ground.

DAVE shook his head a little in an attempt to clear it. He must have blacked out he thought, from that bullet of the Pima Kid's. He was sprawled on the saloon steps with the bodies of the Kid and Garson lying nearby and a crowd of yelling men thronging through the pulsing batwings.

Both Jeff and Edie Mallon were there, helping to support him.

There was one fact that stuck in his mind, bothering him. Later at the doctor's office, when the sawbones had finished working on him and he had a chance to talk to the Mallons, he brought it out.

"Back there you called me Dave."

Old Jeff nodded, soberly. "Sure. I knew right along you weren't Cougar Shemp—I just played a hunch an' a bluff on Garson. Later I figgered I might make you see things about yourself—and it turned out this way was good as any."

Edie Mallon broke in hotly, "When he introduced you to me as Cougar Shemp and I saw what he'd been up to, I—I got so mad I couldn't even speak civilly to you!"

Dave turned slowly, looked at her. "But—you had never seen my brother, Edie. How did you know Jeff was lying?"

A queer horror flooded her eyes then and she looked quickly at her uncle. Old Jeff shook his head, put a hand on Dave's arm.

"It's all right, Edie," he said, gently. "The boy would have known some day. She did see Cougar Shemp once, Dave—less than a month ago. He'd read that piece in the paper, same as you. He came riding into my place one night and I told him the setup. But when I mentioned the Pima Kid's name he—got scared. He forked his bronc and hit the trail again."

"No!" There was a harsh positiveness in the word but somehow he knew Jeff Mallon was telling the truth. And so had the Pima Kid been, after all, for the Kid had not had the courage to meet a brave man. His boyhood idol had shattered, finally and irrevocably.

"Don't take it too hard, boy," Jeff said, quietly, and Edie's firm brown hand was squeezing Dave's, comforting him. "Dave—why don't you stay? You've shown you've got the sand not to keep running all over creation."

Dave didn't answer an once. But the way he felt at the pressure of Edie Mallon's hand in his own told him pretty clearly what his answer was going to be.

At Jake Garrison's side walked a pallid-faced man, a six-gun at his side. . . .

LEAD-SHY

A man who went to seed in the helltown of Pima City would have to sprout powder-smoke by dawn—or have his last laugh from the grave!

By SAM CARSON

MEN go to seed in holes like Pima City, where life is held lightly and a smoking six-gun in the hand of a greedy man thunders out ready-made law. There must be new men—young men to ride in now and then and stake their claims, or else there will be decaying morals and shabby houses.

And ornery critters you must call neighbor. I know. I've been Doc Fairbanks, a pill-roller in Pima City, too many years to move on and hang up my diploma from a long defunct medical school in another town. But Pima City stirred itself one blustery, sunless day. And when the acrid powder smoke whipped eastward, a lot of us tired old-timers realized hope—hope that we could finish out our days in a cleaner atmosphere.

First two young men rode in—one was Jake Garrison, who'd bought the PD spread. The place was about gone, a small outfit with water, fifty head of cattle and range for five hundred more. The other newcomer was Joey Luther.

Luther rented an old shack from Benton Harp, a fact which in itself wasn't unusual, for

Harp was agent for the Big Six Cattle Company, and the Big Six owned most of Pima City. I said he was young, but his face was bleak, and he didn't talk much. He looked old. He looked more than that—sort of ageless, I guess, except for the fire in his eyes which never went out. He was a little man and he put up a saddle and harness shop.

Jake Garrison was a heavily built man, good-natured and lazy. Also he was reported to be a widower. For some reason, he took to Luther, and they'd spend hours when Jake should have been patching up his wreck of a place, playing checkers. Jake would go on talking as he moved his pieces. Luther seldom spoke, and grunted only when he'd corner his opponent.

Harp had a habit of drifting over occasionally and watching, as would Sheriff Redmond. Harp was a giant of a man, old and eternally clad in a frock coat and wide-brimmed hat. He wore a gun, but I knew he had too many physical ailments to be much of a physical menace. Harp didn't have to be personal. He was boss, and he had men on the Big Six payroll to back him.

Harp had Duck Lanham as range boss and hatchet man. The first day Lanham and Joey Luther met, as far as I know, I was talking with Sheriff Redmond before the saddle shop. Jake and Joey were squared off before the door, bending over the checker board. Harp had a cigar uptilted and unlighted, watching Joey's move which holed Jake up for keeps. Lanham rode up, tossed his lines over his mount's head, and landed like a cat, for all his two hundred pounds.

He nodded at me, gray eyes half closed and his slit of a mouth tight. He walked toward Harp, ignoring the checker players. The way he spilled the board was deliberate. Pieces went all over the ground and Joey Luther's face jerked up. If he was bleak-faced naturally, he wore a mask of pure hate now.

Harp frowned. "Duck, you shore ruined a good game."

"Sorry, boss." Lanham grinned now, looking down at Joey.

As for Jake, the ranchman laughed. "Reckon you saved me from a clean skunking."

I DIDN'T pay much attention to Lanham's comment. I was looking at Joey. A man doesn't hate that much on first sight. The poison was too deep. Lanham and Joey had met before.

"I got a telegram," Lanham said. "Duke rode in with it from the junction. It says the stockholders are sending a committee to look the Big Six over."

Harp swore. He turned and headed for the Big Six office directly across the street. Lanham picked up his mount's lines and followed. He looked back once, and he was still grinning.

Jake was setting the pieces back carefully. "Shucks Joey," he said, "maybe it was—well, accidental. This is how they were."

Joey got up. He had the look of a man who could murder with bare hands. "I got a piece of work to do," he mumbled.

Jake sat there a few moments, fingering the checker pieces. "Dadgum it," he complained, "I wish Lanham had been more careful." He got up and walked down the wooden sidewalk.

Sheriff Redmond followed me. My office was near the jail.

"Trouble's coming to Harp," he grunted. "Shore as sin."

"Harp?"

"Don't you get the hang, Doc? Who's running Pima City? The answer is Duck Lanham. Harp's afraid of him. I'll lay money they're sending out a bunch of jiggers from back East on account of something Lanham wrote. What's he got against Joey Luther? First I thought Duck wanted to pick a fuss with Jake. Then I saw Joey's face—" he broke off. Redmond was beholden to Harp for his job, and he was getting old.

I knew the sheriff was worrying, because Lanham was a killer, and the fastest man with a six-gun I'd ever seen in action. Furthermore, he was a hard man to beat, using a rifle. Anyway we closed the conversation, and the next day some smallpox broke out in the Mexican part of town. I had to put up a shotgun quarantine, and folks were so scared they shot every roving dog and goat, for fear it came from the flats. That was why I missed the Easterners, who spent five days going over Big Six holdings. Somebody did tell me that Lanham went out with them while Harp stayed in the office, drinking most of the time, which wasn't like him.

It was around dark and I was back in my office, plenty tired, when Jake Garrison came riding up. "Doc," he said, "you're the coroner, ain't you?"

"I am. Why?"

"Lanham just killed Lupe Lopez. He's out on the trail north of his place."

"Told Redmond about it?"

"He's done gone out with Starr, that dep'ty of his."

There was nothing much to do. Lupe had a slug clean through his heart. Redmond was standing by Cullins, a Big Six wagon boss. The sheriff said Lanham was ready to make a sworn statement that Lupe had attacked him with a knife.

"That's funny," I said. "Lupe's sixty, and he's been a good hombre the last ten years."

"Good hombre," Cullins snorted. "Duck caught him dead to rights, stealing Big Six cows. Found 'em in a corral in the scrub pine back of his place."

"And Lupe—where was he?"

"We found him riding in from the foot of the Twin Needles. There's fifty odd head missing up thataways too. Duck told Lupe we'd found the cattle and he spurred his horse right at Duck. I'd say it was plumb suicide."

I looked at Redmond. He averted his eyes, blew out the oil lantern he had been holding to view the remains.

"Anyway," he mumbled, "I reckon, with witnesses, you got to say it was self-defense."

Well, that was that. Lanham made his statement, and he had four other witnesses besides Cullins. It was later—in fact, the next day—before I got around to wondering how come Jake had brought in the news. Then I saw him, playing checkers with Joey. They stopped playing—an unusual thing. Jake was fiddling with the pieces when Joey looked up. For the first time I noticed a thin scar under his chin. It was very red today. The man was under stress.

"You aim to let Lupe's case drop?"

"The jury heard the evidence," I said. "The evidence made us call it self-defense."

"It was cold-blooded murder," Joey said briefly. "Tell him about it, Jake. Not that it matters."

"Aw—" Jake hesitated. "Doc, two men drove the cattle to Lupe's place. Lupe and his folks were gone. I think they were visiting in the flats."

"Why didn't you tell that at the inquest?"

Jake stared at me thoughtfully. He looked worried. "I was a long way off, riding by Red Mesa. Could have been mistaken."

"Uh-huh," Joey grunted. "But you wasn't. What about Lanham telling Lupe to sell out?"

"Aw, Lupe was scared. Just the other day he mentioned something about Lanham—wanted to buy him out for the Big Six."

"A batch of dry acres like Lupe's?" I said. "Goats and a handful of scrub cattle and a string of horses nobody'd own! It don't make sense."

"You'll find out," Joey said darkly.

Sheriff Redmond looked disturbed when I said something about Jake's version. "Better let it ride, Doc," he advised. "I got enough to worry me. Harp's on his second drunk this month. You'll be needed soon, I'm thinking."

Harp didn't send for me, however, and right away Joey moved his shop to the old Pima City Sun building. Nobody'd put out a paper since Fess Albright had died. But the Big Six didn't own the property. I was still too busy with new babies and old folks to hear details. And then Jake Garrison came to see me.

HE LOOKED like a sick man when he shuffled into my place, shoulders drooping, a feverish look in his eyes. He waved me away when I reached for his pulse.

"No pills, Doc," he said gloomily. "It's worse."

"What's wrong?"

Jake sat down heavily. He was nervous, and there was the hurt look of a boy evident as well. "Doc," he asked, "what do you think of polecats who'd find your stock on the edge of their range and shoot 'em?"

"I'd say hanging would be too good."

Jake lifted his head. "It happened," he stated dully. "Happened to me."

"You're joking."

"Lanham's men—they killed eight head of my fat ones."

I looked at him. Jake wasn't the joking sort. This was real. "Lanham?" I asked. "Where did it happen?"

"Know the piñon ridge toward the trail from my place? There's a neck of flat land going to the spring on my land. They were in the piñon."

This was rough stuff. It was too raw for me to keep neutral. I shook Jake's shoulders. "Come on, we're going to see Redmond about this, if you're sure who shot your cattle."

Jake didn't move. "Redmond," he said bitterly. "What can he do? Harp's man, ain't he? He's got to think of his job. Yes, I know it was Duck Lanham. He rode up to my place and told me. Had six of his men with him. Wanted to know what I was going to do about it."

There was more behind this than Jake had disclosed. I went to my cabinet, got out a bottle I kept for strictly medicinal purposes—and emergencies. I gave Jake a big shot of the stuff. He gulped it down in one swallow, sat there fingering the glass.

"Doc," he confessed, "I'm the worst shot in the state. Matter of fact I don't like to kill even a coyote. I can't hold down a six-gun. Bullets bounce up—every which way but right." He paused. "Lanham," he blurted, "offered me eight thousand for my holdings. Warned me to take it and get out alive, he did."

"First Lupe and now you," I muttered. "I mean—"

Jake interrupted me. "Lupe's widow has sold out, to the Big Six. Doc, what's the answer?"

I told him I didn't know. It didn't make good sense, going after little ranchmen that way over land that was not worth wasting bullets for.

"Looks like you have no choice," I said. "Maybe you are right about Redmond. He's old. So am I. I don't know much to tell you, Jake. Not at my age, except to ease out. That is, if you want to live."

"I ain't selling," Jake announced. He put down the glass with a thump.

"You know what happened to Lupe?"

Jake nodded.

"You can't face Lanham, or any one of his top men with gun or rifle. You admit that yourself. Why not go to Harp about this?"

Jake got up, sighed. "He's drunk. What am I going to do? I dunno. I dunno." He walked out. As he went toward the old paper office I saw Cullins and a couple of Big Six hands step out of the cattle company's office. They stared, then looked at each other and grinned.

Lanham came out, nudged Cullins' side and laughed. Then Lanham came across the street and on down to my office. He came stamping in, silver spurs jingling, gun holsters tied down, an arrogant man with eyes too close set, and a color which was too high for a man of his years and heft. But Duck Lanham wasn't coming for treatment.

He rocked on his heels, looking me over thoughtfully. "Harp's got a smothering spell at his house, Doc," he stated. "Bad, ain't it?"

"Could be. I'll go up."

Lanham put out a hand as I started for my bag. "Wait. Jake Garrison speaking his mind? I saw him drift in here."

"I gave Jake a tonic," I said with as much dignity as I could summon.

Lanham let out a guffaw. "I'll be dogged. Well, he needs one, bad. And say, Doc, I ain't no pill-roller, but Harp's out on a limb. He's swigged enough liquor to drown a horse."

I measured the speaker, wondering how far I could go. After all, I was an old man. And old men can go far, at times. "What made him lose his sense of judgment, Duck? Or do I have to guess?"

The man's mouth became a slit. He scowled and his cold eyes bored into me. And as quickly he laughed. "Why guess?" he said. "Harp'll tell you anyhow. He's virtually out as agent. I'm in. Will be officially as soon as I get some official mail."

"You mean Harp's clean through?"

Lanham shook his head. "I'm no fool. They wanted to ship Harp, but I wouldn't stand for it. He's the symbol of the Big Six in this country." Lanham laughed again. "So they keep him as legal representative."

HARP was sober when I brought him out of his attack. I gave him the works about his condition and how long his heart would last, swigging hard liquor at that rate. The man was white and the lines in his face were deepened. "I'm through in Pima Bend," he croaked. "Me—Benton Harp, who took Lanham from that Wyoming outfit and gave him his chance."

Harp propped his big frame on an elbow. "Doc, you and Redmond are the only ones I can talk to. Those money-mad owners of the Big Six want bigger production. Say, haven't I been fair?"

"As agent of the Big Six, you've done all right, I guess."

Harp laid back. "I'm no killer to gain my ends." He closed his eyes. I went back and talked to Harp's Chinese housekeeper.

Wind was whipping up sand so much I crossed the street to take the boardwalk. I had to pass the *Pima City Sun,* with its rack of leather goods swinging outside, when Joey hailed me. The man was excited, and his face and hands were smudged with black. "Come to the back," he called.

Wondering, I followed around a partition. It was gloomy, in spite of a skylight. But I saw two Mexicans from the flats turning the crank of the rickety old press. A Mexican kid was feeding it. I guess I looked like a ghost. And Joey's face relaxed for the first time into what might pass for a smile. He went over to the stack and handed me a sheet.

It was the *Pima City Sun* all right, on paper yellow with age, the sheets almost crumbly. But I lost interest in the revival of our newspaper when I read the story beneath inch high wood type headlines.

BIG SIX THUGS KILL JG CATTLE; THREATEN OWNER.

There was a story beneath. It was a good job too, but I forgot to ask Joey about his ability to set type and turn out a newspaper, let alone write well, because of the charges.

> Last night Jake Garrison suffered the loss of a dozen head of cattle, slaughtered by Duck Lanham on his own admission because they had strayed onto Big Six range. Furthermore Lanham has come out in the open, shoving Benton Harp out of the way as Big Six agent, and is murdering his way to complete control of the water on the JG.
>
> Harp was shelved because he wasn't pushing the Big Six. Lanham had the answer.
>
> Graze more cattle. That means more water closer at hand. The JG has the water. Lupe Lopez happened to be astride the water runoff—so he died.
>
> This story is to remind every man in the Pima Bend country that, with Lanham running the Big Six, there is no chance to appease him. There is only one thing to do.
>
> Fight the Big Six till its owners come to their senses and run Duck Lanham and his thugs out of the country!

My hands were shaking when I finished the article. "What are you going to do?" I asked Joey. "Invite lead poisoning?"

"I'm going to issue the *Pima Bend Sun*—free." Joey's voice was firm. "Sure I know how to get out a paper. I got one out for a good many years, up in Wyoming. Lanham can tell you something about that."

"I thought you two had met." I handed the

paper back. "Joey, maybe you're right, but even this story won't clean up the mess, granting you're dead right about Lanham. He's too powerful. You know what will happen?"

Joey didn't smile. He just looked at me. "I'm just asking one thing, Doc. Don't mention this. I'm circulating the *Sun* after dark."

It was daylight when Harp's Chinese came for me. It was too late. Harp had passed on. I walked down the street to meet Duck Lanham. His face was livid, and he held a copy of the *Pima Bend Sun*. I told him Harp was dead.

Lanham stared at me. "I'll be damned," he exclaimed. "This happens, when I needed him—bad. You see this—" He thrust the paper under my nose. "Stuck under the door of my room. I've been looking for that lizzard since somebody woke me up by banging on the door."

"Joey printed this?" I asked.

"Wait till I find him. He's gone. I'll load that rat down with lead!" He hurried back to the Harp home.

IT WAS a queer morning. Even the sky was loaded with gray, scudding clouds, and the wind was extra cold. A half dozen times groups of men rode into town, going to the Twin Needles Bar, or the Big Six office. Some of them had come in because riders had gone out to report Harp's death. But the main thing, I knew, was to obey Lanham's summons. For he had called his top men in.

I walked to Joey's place. The door was barred and papers were pasted inside the windows. I heard no sound.

Sheriff Redmond walked up with Starr. The two officers looked at the blacked-out windows, tried the door and came down the walk.

"Seen Joey Luther?" Redmond asked.

"No. Just tried the door. Maybe he's gone."

"He'd better be," Starr growled. "Fine mess he caused. These Big Six men are talking about a lynching. Or burning the place up, at least."

Lanham came down the hill, walking slowly. He had on his frock coat. It covered the tops of his holsters. I saw Cullins, who'd mounted his horse, slide back to the ground. He waited till Lanham reached him. They talked and Cullins lifted his hand.

At the signal, men hanging around the Big Six office came running. Somebody was bellowing at a knot of men before the Twin Needles Bar. In all, a dozen men either left the cluster, or poured out of the saloon. Within three minutes, Lanham had twenty men gathered.

The three of us on the walk said nothing. "There he goes," Redmond groaned. "Trouble, if Joey's fool enough to be hiding inside."

When Lanham started toward the *Sun* building, the sheriff called to him. Lanham turned, frowning.

"Duck," Redmond warned, "there ain't going to be any destruction of prop'ty. If you want a warrant against Joey—providing there's cause, I'll serve it."

Lanham spat, his act one of pure contempt. Two men came from behind the Big Six office, bearing a pole. Others joined them, lifted the improvised ram to their shoulders.

"You're breaking the law," Redmond shouted.

GET THAT KILLER, RANGER!

It was tough for Clay Webb to arrest the brother of the girl he loved, but it was a chore that had to be done, if he didn't want to dance a grisly hangnoose rigadoon himself! Read Bob Obets' dramatic saga of the Brimstone Border, "Ranger, Ride No More!"

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STAR WESTERN

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Nobody even laughed. It was a pitiful sight to me, this ignoring of the old man who had lost his soul. For that was what he had done. Redmond fingered his gun butt nervously, helpless as the pole crashed against the door of the *Sun* building. It yielded with a splintering sound.

It was Starr who let out a yelp, distracting my attention. He was goggle-eyed, pointing toward the bridge at the lower end of town.

A straggling mob, on foot, on horseback and in buckboards, was coming up the street. I saw Mexicans, ranchers like Lupe Lopez and Jake Garrison. There were old men and boys and they carried rifles, six-guns and shotguns.

Walking slowly in the lead were Joey Luther and Jake Garrison.

"Goda'mighty," Redmond exclaimed. "It's a real mob."

It was less than a hundred yards from the bridge to where Lanham stood.

It seemed an endless period of time for the clock to tick on as Jake Garrison, rifle at ready came toward us, head high, while at his side came a little, pallid-faced man, his only weapon a six-gun which was in its holster. But the men who came in solid phalanx behind were grim. Big Six men eased back, leaving Duck Lanham to stand his ground.

Sheriff Redmond walked slowly out in the street, between Lanham and the two leaders. "Boys," he said, "I think it's time to talk things over. Lanham was riled about that story. Maybe he'll cool off."

Jake grinned. "Shucks," he stated, "we ain't looking for trouble. I just went around and collected a bunch of subscribers. To Pima City's newspaper." He walked to the door of Joey's place. "Looks like somebody's done tried to break in." He went in, came back out immediately with the checker board. Ignoring Redmond, Lanham and other onlookers, he dragged out two chairs. Lanham was as mystified as anyone else. The man who had been dominating the Pima Bend Country seemed irresolute and Jake and Joey sat down to play a game.

Somebody snickered. Then others laughed. Jake didn't look up.

"You're opening," Jake said. "I opened last time."

Some of the Big Six men drifted away, bewildered. Redmond looked about as helpless as any man I ever saw. As for Lanham, he looked around. Men were laughing all about him, even Cullins. The sight of Joey and Jake, ignoring Duck Lanham to play a postponed game of checkers, finally got the entire group to laughing. Even Redmond chuckled and Lanham's face went purple, then drained of color.

The man was beginning to realize what had happened. Pima City was laughing at him—at Duck Lanham whose word had been unwritten, but obeyed law.

Defiance of authority he could meet and handle. Looking at him I comprehended the struggle within his mind. If he drew his gun now, he could get both checker players. But that grim mob would perforate his body with slugs and bullets instantly. The situation was gone from Duck's hands—gone forever.

Twice the Big Six agent's hands touched gun butts. Twice they lifted. Joey didn't raise his head, nor did Jake. And bit by bit men moved nearer, watching, not Lanham, but the game.

I was looking at Lanham's face when the break came. His facial muscles worked. And then, all at once, his shoulders drooped. He turned with an effort, went toward the Big Six office. Once he stumbled, a hulk of a man who knew he was defeated.

None of his men followed. Lanham went alone. He slammed the door.

Cullins went back to his horse. He mounted. "Doc," he called to me, "what time they burying Harp?"

"Don't know," I said. "Guess this afternoon."

"Think I'll ride out to a job. Matson—you and Chunky want to go along?"

That was the way Big Six men left town. Redmond went to the jail, and directly I was left with the checker players, plus a handful of watchful men who kept their eyes on the Big Six office.

Jake looked up at me, grinned. "What do you think, Doc?" he asked. "I'll bet five bucks Lanham catches the noon stage for the junction."

"Maybe." I squatted beside Joey. "What happened?" I asked.

Joey smiled. He looked different when he did that. "Oh, Jake and I made deliveries of my new paper—in person. Covered a lot of ground in a few hours. Then we brought our new subscribers in. Told 'em the play we'd decided on to break Lanham."

"You licked him. He'll pull out. Uh—Joey, what's between you and Duck?"

Joey's mouth lost its grin. "I was his partner, up in Wyoming. I ran a paper. Duck ran a spread we both owned. He bankrupted me.

"Duck," he added, "made me back down with his guns. Before people. I'd found where he'd cached some of the money he'd taken from the deal. Took a long time for me to make a comeback. But I did. Then I located Duck. So I followed."

Duck Lanham left, like Jake prophesied. And the frock-coated stockholders who came out and learned some facts of life, picked a new agent for the Big Six.

Things are going better now. The stockholders picked Jake Garrison as agent.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 39)

1. No. Told there was going to be a "tree squeak hunt," you probably wouldn't get your rifle. Or if you did, you would carry no ammunition for it. A tree squeak is a mythical creature, said to live in the forest and to make a noise like the rustling of the trees. Many a tenderfoot has gone on a tree squeak hunting expedition.

2. You would probably be most likely to find an "Irish baby buggy" near where intensive mining was being carried on. In the West, according to the slanguage of the miner, an Irish baby buggy is a wheelbarrow.

3. A "donkey puncher" is a logger who runs a certain type of engine.

4. A bull. "Animal" is the typical slang term used in reference to bulls.

5. An arroyo is a dry stream bed. Arroyos, however, are noted for their ability to become raging torrents, in the event of a flash storm.

6. True. Some worthy once defined a bonanza as a "hole in ground owned by a champion liar." Actually, of course, a bonanza is a rich pocket of ore, or rich gold source.

7. False. The buffalo range is sparsely populated, open-range country.

8. A cavvieyard is a horse herd.

9. False. A "contract buster" is not a cowpuncher who leaves his job before a formerly agreed upon time. Rather, it is a cowpuncher who agrees to break a certain number of horses on a contract basis.

10. In the West you would probably be most likely to find the *frijoles* down near the Mexican border.

11. There is no difference in the meaning of the terms "hoe down" and "hoe dig." Westerners use the two interchangeably.

12. Probably the most likely place to find a "timber beast" in the West would be in the vicinity of a logging camp or lumber camp. A "timber beast," as you doubtless know, is a slang term used for a logger.

13. A cowpuncher will often refer to a particularly dangerous low-hanging limb of a tree as a "widow-maker." The term is also familiar in logging camps.

14. If a friend of yours at the card table told you he was going to "holler calf rope" in a few minutes, you would know that in a short while he was going to give up and quit.

15. "Judge Lynch" is the mythical person in the West to whom responsibility for all unauthorized hangings is laid.

16. True. A cowpuncher who rides without spurs and with stirrups untied is said to be riding "in the slick."

17. True. A "leggings case" is a cowpuncher who violates a law of the range and who is rewarded by being tied up (often to a wagon wheel) and whipped with a pair of leggings.

18. A parker is a bed quilt of the sort generally found in camp.

19. The terms "night wrangler" and "nighthawk" are used interchangeably in the West. The former is generally the more popular of the two, however.

20. If the ranch boss sent you out to look after the "peeps," you would feed the new baby chickens on the place. To the cowpuncher, chicks are "peeps."

RIDE OUT AND FIGHT!

II

"A woman will follow you to heaven, son—but a hoss will follow you to hell!"

CHAPTER ONE

Devil's Beat

HIS father left them alone and the boy stood awkwardly, wanting to drag these last moments out into a million years, yet hoping to get the parting over quickly. His mother said bitterly, "It ain't that we don't love you, Lem!"

"Aw, stop frettin, ma." He swallowed. "I know there ain't no money in this sandtank and you still got eight mouths to feed."

She looked up at him and laid a work-gnarled hand with odd gentleness upon his face. For a moment, he thought the bitterness in her would break. Then the steel came into her eyes, and she whacked him solidly on the shoulder.

She said almost harshly, "All right, son, ride out and lick the devil! Yo're only fifteen, but yo're a Texan, and that makes you more than most when the test comes."

He gave a jerky grin and let her kiss him contradictorily. He was glad this was over before the younger ones came awake.

His father was waiting with the horses, and they hit leather without a word or glance. At the brow of the coulee the boy turned to look back. His mother was still standing out in the bare, packed yard. Her small body swayed slowly like a weathered old tree meeting the solid force of the west wind. She had one arm raised against the filtering gray light—a hard farewell.

The boy lifted his hat and wigwagged back and felt a hotness grip his throat. He set his teeth and turned away and slapped his horse to catch up.

His father reined up at Trinity, and taking the day's first chew, handed him the plug. "Keep it," he grated. "It is about all that I can give you."

Lem said thickly, "Don't feel harsh on yoreself, pa."

"How the hell would I feel?" the old man barked. He spat savagely into the forming sworls of heat. "Well, I have taught you to know hosses as few men ever learn. Remember this, the hoss does not live you cannot handle as long as you respect yoreself. That is the solitary thing a hoss demands, and for it, it will follow you to hell. It is the only thing in this world, next to a good woman, that will stick with you to a thirsty death."

"Yessir," the kid gulped.

His father gave a savage nod. "Now get rollin' and shuck yoreself of poverty by yore own hands and wits!"

"So long, pa," the boy managed and searched for some last personal expression upon the old man's face. But the old man was watching the horizon with a terrible anger at all heaven and earth setting his face solid. He did not answer a single grunt.

The boy put his horse across the river and at the top of the long clay grade looked back. His father was sitting exactly as he had left him—a giant buffeted and kicked and dragged by circumstance, but with a pride so fierce he would not yield his freedom by working for another man.

The kid bit the sobs down into him and rode up the Chisolm, living on berries and rabbits along the way. Like thousands of trail kids before him, he simply drifted until he wound up in the wild whooping hellhole of Cheyenne.

HE HAD never heard or dreamed of anything like this. All day and all night there was a ceaseless flow of violent, unpent, frontier life. Men wore silks and brocades that would have made his mother weep for joy. More money was wagered on a single card than his family had seen in their whole lives.

The boy moseyed around bug-eyed, not able

By T. C. McCLARY

On the fifteenth day the horse tried to kill him. . . .

to believe all this was true and not belonging to it. He was just a big raw kid with honest brown eyes riding a spavined, jugheaded, swaybacked brush pony that thought the sun rose and set upon him. Maybe that was the reason Belle Keats took him up. She could remember a time when she had dreams, and a different name, and brothers like this kid.

He wouldn't take her money for an errand. That was what brought the first light of appraisal into her cynical, knowing eyes. She wouldn't have him lower his pride to run errands after that. But she had him take her riding afternoons and that simple fact was enough to fill the boy's life.

Wild Bill Hickok was marshal at the time. Kidding her in the Oregon saloon he asked, "Raisin' 'em special from the cradle, Belle?"

"Sometimes," she answered, "a woman can help a kid stand clear of the worst of the pack."

"If the pack gets them, they are the kind to run with the pack," he told her. "Nothing can change that."

She shot him her mocking look. "Men are mighty hard—after they've covered their own trails, Bill! This boy is worth saving. Have you seen him handle a horse?"

His attention sharpened. "How?"

"Like it was a woman he was in love with. That bush derelict of his would run its heart out for him, Bill!"

"Don't look like it had more sense," he grinned.

But he took note of the kid after that. Other kids slept in bars and poolrooms and back alleys. But this kid had the pride to find himself a little gulch and put out snares and build himself a wickiup. There was one day, too, that his snares brought him no luck, and Wild Bill knew for a fact that the kid went hungry rather than ask somebody for a handout.

But the boy was still just another drifting trail kid until the day the half-wild stage horses got into a ruckus in front of the Oregon. In nothing flat, they stirred up a dust cloud filled with flying hoofs and thrashing harness and frenzied trumpetings. Before they could be stopped, the riot had sucked in half the horses on the street. The kid's horse had broken loose along with the rest and was in there raising hell when the boy came running from an alley.

He stopped a space up the street and sized things up and then piped shrilly, "Steady, Powder! Come out of there, Powder boy!"

His reedy voice was a bare peep amidst the tumult. But the horse heard and came regretfully from the confusion with all the excitement still in it of a high old time. In two minutes, the boy had talked it quiet. It was the only quieted horse along the street.

Later Wild Bill stopped the boy and commented, "Son, somebody must of thought a heap of you to gentle that hoss that way."

The kid turned purple at this high notice. "Aw, Powder ain't much," he blurted. "Jist a wild bush popper I catched and busted."

Bigmouth Flannigan let out a chuckle of derision and asked for the benefit of the crowd, "Marshal, you calculate them big winds down Texas way jist plumb git into their blood and they can't help it?"

There was a laugh and it dawned on the boy they didn't believe he had trained the horse himself. Maybe they even thought he stole it! He was bawling, but he was so scorched up he didn't know it. He turned and hollered, "If yo're aimin' to say I'm a liar, mister, you jist get two good mustangs and I'll ride you clean into the dust!"

With anybody else it would have been laughed off, but with Bigmouth Flannigan involved, the boys wouldn't hear the end of it. Bigmouth was a pretty flashy rider and they took pains to find the two orneriest mustangs in the hills. They charged a quarter admission down at the rodeo corral and what money the gateman didn't forget went up as prize.

They put the kid aboard in the chute and took the blind off the horse. The kid was game, but the critter was just too downright tough. It slammed and banged him and near broke his bottom from his top. It gave him a rough skyride for two full minutes then bumped him in a twisting arc that knocked him cold.

Bigmouth rode out giving his critter quirt and spur as hard as he could. In the end, he beat it to its knees, half senseless.

Wild Bill said to Belle that night, "Well, yore boy was game, but he has not got the toughness for these mountain hosses. He could have whipped his animal down if he had used a heavy quirt."

A woman's amusement danced across her eyes. "You hear what he did after he came to?"

Wild Bill looked at her.

"Took three dollars and twenty cents down to the corral master and made a deal to buy the horse."

"To kill it?" the marshal asked. "I didn't figure he had that kind of temper."

"To take it out into the hills and gentle it," she corrected.

"It will kill him!" Wild Bill stated. Then repeated speculatively, "Three dollars and twenty cents? I will bet that is every last cent of money that kid's ever had!"

The betting was high on the horse against the kid, but few really expected to see the horse again. It hit the town with a jolt when the kid rode it back in, gentle as a lamb. It was still skittish, but it was really gentled. It had learned most of what it had to know for riding, and half a dozen tricks.

"It was just lonesome for company," the kid explained. "That was all that made it mean."

The boys grinned and whooped it up, and paid the kid that honest respect of all horsemen for a man who can make a wild horse use its head. The kid sold the horse for thirty-two dollars and a half, and spent the whole works on the first fancy store boots he had ever owned. For three days he was a hero; then some new incident gripped the town's fickle fancy.

But two men did not forget what the kid had done. The one was Wild Bill, the other, Diamond Spade.

SPADE was a gambler, rustler, murderer and anything else that offered easy money, but he was not a tough. He was tall and trim, dressed with a quiet flash, and he had an easy arrogance and gun hand to match Wild Bill's. He was just the kind of outlaw to fascinate a green young kid and after that exhibition of horse training, he practically adopted the boy. Gun hands, rustlers and toughs were a dime a dozen, but a born horse gentler was something rare, and something that he needed.

He dressed the kid up and gave him a good gun, and framed a fight for the kid to win to give him some swagger and some spunk. All

this attention went to the boy's head the way it would with most. But the first mention of a little easy money brought a guard up across the kid's eyes, and Diamond saw he would have to take it easy. He could beat him up or frighten him, perhaps, but the particular job he wanted the boy for required friendliness.

So Diamond laughed and said, "Not that kind? Well, I respect ya for it, Kid, and I am glad you came out that way on the test!"

The kid looked both relieved and disturbed. "But you don't—uh—think I'm a dude, kinda?"

Diamond chuckled. "Why, shucks, you ain't ready for real action yet, in any case. You got a heap of toughening and growing still to do to be a man!"

He said it casually, good-naturedly, but it burned into the boy and made him squirm, just as Diamond knew it would. Added to it, the boy was getting lonesome for the momentary flick of glory that had been his. He felt the need to prove his manhood and was groping for a chance. He was getting fresh and cocky and a little arrogant, and sooner or later that could mean only one thing in Cheyenne. It meant trouble, and that was just what Diamond wanted to see happen.

It was Belle who got roiled about it and fronted Wild Bill. "Why don't you do something?" she demanded.

"Well," he growled, "it is kind of hard to do. The kid won't take any ordinary job, they tell me, and he ain't yet broke the law. When he does, I can step in."

She gave a contemptuous laugh. "That is going to be a fine time . . . after his gun is hot! It will be Diamond who steps in then!"

Wild Bill avoided her gaze. He disliked the role of savior, but Belle was putting a slur upon his manhood that his vanity could not tolerate. He went and looked up M. K. Reed.

Reed was about the biggest rancher along the Oregon, and had stunned the whole West when he brought a stallion worth ten thousand dollars all the way from Ireland. He was a taciturn man with snow white hair and fierce mustaches, and eyes as realistic as those of an old timber wolf.

Wild Bill said, "Mike, that is a good kid going bad in a fast way. Why don't you give him a decent job?"

"And end up chasing him and some of my best stock into the mountains?" Reed asked dryly. "Not me, Bill. I have seen too many of these hungry trail kids. Once they get into the barrel with the wild bunch, they are tainted to the core."

"This kid is different," the marshal insisted. "The kind yo're talking about don't gentle a hoss the way he did."

He hit Reed's weak spot and the rancher bristled to hide his softness. "Not a chance!" he growled. Then added, "Anyway, what have I got for a kid? Breaking scrubs at best, and that pays fifteen a month. No kid hanging out with Diamond Spade is listening to fifteen dollar talk!"

"You've got no gentler for yore Morgans," Wild Bill pointed out.

Reed stared at him as if he were crazy. "That Morgan strain I'm breeding for the cavalry? Marshal, you've been rabbit-bit and it's tetched yore head! If anything was to happen to that Morgan cavvy, it would throw this country back twenty, maybe fifty years. And it would ruin me."

"There ain't much doubt what it would do to this country," Wild Bill agreed. "This is God's front yard, but it ain't worth a damn till there's enough good hossflesh to go around." He blew against his upper lip and glanced back at the light streaming from the Oregon. "Still, I think this kid would pan out if he had a chance to prove it."

"I will give him a chance breaking scrub cow ponies," Reed stated definitely. "But I will wager he won't take it."

CHAPTER TWO

Glory Ride

WILD BILL nodded and turned back down street. He took position upon the Oregon stoop, putting an even light on a long, thin cigar. The thin gray ash was the exact length of the tobacco when the kid came jingling along in his new outfit. He had grown pretty cocky, but he could still darken at the attention of this soft-spoken man.

Wild Bill said quietly, stopping him, "Kid, I hear you've gotten too good to take a job."

The boy turned scarlet and looked down at his boots. "Well—it ain't exactly that, Mr. Hickok. It's jist—well, there ain't much work in a town like this a Texan wants to stoop to."

He said that from his heart, and Wild Bill's lips eased with a smile. He had more than a little of that kind of pride himself. Guns and gold and gambling and horses were the only fit support for a real man. "What would you think of working for Mr. Reed?" he asked.

"Mr. Reed of Crazy Dipper?" the kid breathed, wide-eyed. "Why criminy, he's got the finest hosses in this whole country, I betcha!"

"That's right," Bill nodded. "But of course, that kind of work doesn't pay much alongside cadging around a bar."

The boy purpled. "I ain't cadged nothin'," he grated. "And even you ain't got a right to say that, Mr. Hickok!"

"Ain't been workin', have you?" the marshal asked softly.

The boy squirmed. "No. But what I been spendin' is a loan."

"That loan can get pretty big, Lem," the marshal told him. "If I was you, I'd ride out and see Mike Reed. But he is a hard boss. Don't go out if you feel soft."

"Oh, I ain't scared of work," the boy mumbled. "It's jist that I ain't takin' any job that comes along. But I'll go see him if you say."

"I've got a heap of confidence in you," Bill said. "Don't take any job I send you to and quit halfway."

"No, sir," the boy nodded. "I'd finish the piece even if it killed me!"

The kid grinned and turned into the roll of noise and through the sheets of smoke that hung in layers through the yellow light. Men called to him and some wanted to buy him a drink. It made him feel pretty good and conscious of the figure he was cutting. He wasn't just another trail kid any longer, and he was no common cowhand. He got the same respect men gave to the tops—to the foremen and top wranglers and gunhands.

It struck him suddenly that his glory would tarnish if he took any ordinary job and wondered uncomfortably just what Mike Reed might offer him.

Diamond was sitting at his regular big table, eating a big steak as he talked with two men. He wigwagged and, as kid came up, said jovially; "Boys, here is the best hoss gentler in this whole country. Mind, I didn't say any ordinary, common buster or wrangler. . . . I said, gentler! He takes the fire out of the worst outlaw the way the Silver Queen puts it into a man. I would trust him with thousand dollar stock!"

The men looked impressed. Diamond chuckled at the boy, "Sit down and order, Lem. These here gentlemen know a thing or two about hosses themselves." He gave a full-chested laugh.

The kid thought there was no doubt that one did. He had a rough, angular face and hard, dull-surfaced eyes. The brand of a longrider was upon him. But the other man had him stumped. He looked like a slick, successful merchant, or maybe one of these speculators in boom-towns—sharp enough, but sure no horseman.

He felt both excited and uncomfortable, sensing an undercurrent here he could not understand. It kind of stamped a man out, being invited to sit and eat with Diamond Spade. But with it came a thought of Wild Bill's quiet advice, and that brought a picture of his pa. His pa would have tanned the bottom off him for even speaking to men like these twice!

Diamond gave the men a look over the kid's head and then said, confidential of voice, "Kid, these gentlemen have come up here on a big deal tied up with hosses and a new country that ain't been settled yet. And if plans work out, I am going to cut you in."

The boy looked at him and colored. "Gee, that's pretty swell, Diamond! But how can I help?"

Diamond chuckled. "Yo're goin' to gentle hosses for us!" He caught the boy's quickly sharpening glance. "Branded hosses don't need gentling—no, kid, this is really fine horseflesh and we don't want it spoiled with rough handling. But the deal is bigger than jist that, only this is strictly under yore hat. See, we have found a stretch of country south and west that makes a better pass for the Oregon trail. There'll be towns goin' up—this country's buildin'. We're moving in now—with horses—give us a few years an' we'll make a million dollars."

The kid gulped. He had heard of deals like this one. He felt kind of giddy.

"When do we begin?"

"Oh, there's no rush," Diamond said. "Two months, six months—you don't hurry when yo're after big game."

"Oh," the boy said, disappointed. From two to six months was a lifetime at his age.

Also he kept feeling the mysterious undercurrent to the talk which he could not understand. It made him feel uncertain and shy, and when decent opportunity offered, he made an excuse and drifted out to his wickiup in the gulch. In the morning he rode out to Crazy Dipper, not really wanting a job now that he came to go after it, half sure he was not going to find one suitable, but riding out because he would not face the shame of Wild Bill's eyes if he didn't.

HE CAME over a sun-drenched crest and reined up suddenly, his face afire and his eyes wide with awe. In that instant, all of the flash and hardness of past weeks was stripped from him; he was the same green kid who drifted into Cheyenne. For grazing out on that golden plain was the most beautiful sight a man might ever see. Thirty-five Morgan fillies were grazing there, young and slim and not fully grown, but already full of pride and rhythm and that clean motion that comes with blood.

The kid forgot all about gamblers and gunmen and the bright lights and feverish hilarity of town. He just sat there staring and dreaming, with something like homesickness surging up through him. He thought that just for the chance to gentle one of those blooded animals, a man would walk clean across a burning desert without boots. Just to train it—he never thought of owning anything like that!

Mike Reed had been watching the kid's approach. Now he came out from a wash, but so quietly the kid did not know he was behind him until he spoke. The rancher watched the boy a space and then asked, "Well, what are they like, Lem?"

"Gee, Mr. Reed, they're just about the purtiest thing in the whole world I betcha!"

"Mighty purty and mighty high-blooded," Mike Reed nodded. "And not one of 'em ever was haltered yet."

"Gee, I'd like to gentle a hoss like that!" the boy breathed out of his thoughts.

The rancher chuckled. "That's kinda high stakes for a colt, ain't it? These aren't mustangs, fella!"

The kid looked abashed. "Oh, I was just thinking out loud, Mister Reed! I know you send sometimes two thousand miles to find a top wrangler."

"H'mm," Reed muttered. "Well, a man has to prove hisself pretty well before I'd trust him with my Morgans. But if you want a job, I got a breaking job of sorts." The rancher watched him closely. "This ain't any fancy job. It is breaking brush mustangs into working shape and it is out on North Pasture, and it gets kinda lonely. It is a job any man could do, but Wild Bill spoke for you if you want it."

The kid moved uneasily in his saddle. It was tough work with no need for real gentling—in the horse line about what a pick and shovel job is to building a big bridge. It would be an awful come-down from the way Diamond Spade had built him up in town.

"Pay's fifteen and grub," Reed added. "Last fella worked out there hung hisself." He watched the boy's two prides battling, the one pride that no work was too tough for him to take, the other pride that a real horseman didn't need to dirty his hands with this kind of trash.

"'Course," the rancher murmured with a creeping scorn, "that ain't small change for a town fella like you. But it is a chance for a man to prove hisself."

The boy was looking very serious and intent. Reed could almost hear the compliments of Diamond Spade and the bunch ringing through his head. When the kid lifted his head and scowled out at the plain, the rancher could see him trying to form a decent way to turn the offer down. He was turning his horse with disgust when the kid said, "Thanks, Mr. Reed."

The rancher rumbled gruffly, "All right."

"You don't mind if I ride down sometimes and watch those Morgans, do you?" the boy asked.

Reed swung his head. "Ride down from where?"

"Why, North Pasture," the boy said.

Reed's eyes sparked, and he snorted with irritation. "Forty years," he growled, "I've been cuttin' sign on men, and now I have to begin cutting wrong on a kid! You can ride down when yore aminded, but you remember those horses up there are yore job!"

The kid moved out to the pine shack next day and was struck instantly by the loneliness of the place. It was a thousand feet above the lower range and desolation hung through the gulches like a mist. He rode over the country, noting the shorter, tougher grasses and sniffing deeply the keen smells of mountain woods. There was no desert, but there were massive outcroppings and upthrusts of rock, gaunter and more detached than a desert could ever be. The boy looked at this aloof and lonely land and gave a tight grin. He set about gathering his cavvy.

Summer left the North Pasture in one night. One day the grasses were lush and ripe; the next they had lost their tone and were drying. The sky was hot at high sun, but cool after that. At night a chill came down on the whistling winds from the high Rockies, of the gales that swept across half a continent from the East. The chuck wagon came up once a week, and for a brief hour or two, the kid had the company of old Charley.

The third week Charley said critically, "Ya ain't hard enough with these critters. They got no respect fer ya."

The fifth week he allowed, "Well, mebbe ya ain't doin' so bad for a young colt," and went back and reported to M. K. Reed. "He ain't bustin' 'em fast, but they ain't goin' to fergit what he teaches 'em."

THE kid felt the loneliness, but he didn't have too much time for it to get him. He was getting the scrub pintos into working shape. There was fun in it, but there was no real satisfaction, no reason for pride. The animals were wiry, ornery and dumb. They were rough and wide of movement, with no precision of balance, no fine rhythm to them, and not overmuch thinking in their big-boned heads. You couldn't even talk sense into them at first. You had to break 'em rough and teach them how to act with quirt and spur and a hard bit, and letting them get jerked to hell and gone by some tough cow. After enough rough haulings, what they had to do began to dent their heads.

But those haulings were pretty tough on the rider. They left him dog-tired and aching in every joint and cranky as all get out at the end of the day. He'd come in cussing instead of smiling. It was a job for a butcher, not a real horseman, and the fact began to eat at the kid. He didn't even have time to ride down and watch those Morgan yearlings racing like music across the lower plains.

It was Thanksgiving when Diamond Spade showed up. Mike Reed hadn't even thought to send out a special feed or tell the kid to take the day off and come in. The kid was blue as they come, remembering the warm friendliness of that last Thanksgiving back home.

Diamond was hauling a big basket on his saddle horn. Spreading out a feed fit for a king, he grinned. "From yore gal, Belle."

The kid colored clean down his neck, but it didn't keep him from diving in. Rustling up the fire for coffee he said, "I reckon all my friends in town think I'm plumb loco."

"Naw!" Diamond growled. "I wouldn't let 'em know the truth—ain't I yore pardner?" The kid looked at him with big questioning eyes. "I told 'em yore out here breaking Crazy Dipper Morgans."

The boy jutted out his lower lip and looked morose. "He kind of hinted he'd give me a chance if I made good. But he ain't even been near here to find out how I'm doin'!"

Diamond snorted. "Man don't need to see you break this mangy stock to know how you'd handle real horseflesh! You could figure that out if you weren't so loyal, kid—but I admire you for it!"

"Figure it how?"

Diamond extracted two long, fifty cent cigars and put an even light upon the one he took. "I don't want to go panning yore boss."

"Ain't we pardners?" the kid demanded. "You goin' to hold out on a friend?"

"Well, sometimes a man don't want to hear some things," Diamond allowed. "But I've known Reed a long time, and he has a heart of pure ice. Don't you think if he meant to give you a chance at those Morgans, he'd have you gentling 'em now for real spring training? What you got to prove, after gentling a killer and shining in the glory of all Cheyenne?"

The boy dropped his face and stared at the stove. "You mean he just held those Morgans out for bait, kinda, to get someone to work up here cheap?"

"You ain't far wrong," Diamond nodded.

"I'd sure hate to believe that of Mr. Reed," the kid mumbled.

"Don't it look it?" Diamond asked.

"Well—" the boy said hesitantly and then clamped his jaws. "Diamond, don't ask me that! I don't care what, I got my job to finish!"

Diamond chuckled. "That's what I like about you kid—yo're four square. And that's why I been making big plans for you all along."

"You have?"

"Yessirree, but this is another secret twixt you and me. I've done bought me some Morgans for that trail deal and I aim to raise 'em over a piece from here. And who do you think I want to gentle my critters?"

"Me?" the boy asked on a tight, unbelieving note.

"None other! And you can have the help you need. Yo're goin' to be boss, and get seventy-five a month. And something else." He chuckled and winked. "Yore pick of any two-year-old in the bunch!"

"Gee!" the kid breathed. "Gee, Diamond!" What more could he say? Then he wheeled away. "But I got to finish this job first, Diamond!"

"Oh, we'll give you plenty time for that," the man told him. "You come in Christmas, if yore big hearted boss ain't froze you to death up here by then!"

"Aw, he won't leave me up here that long," the kid said. "Why, the first blizzard and this pasture'll be cut off for winter."

He felt pretty good by the time Diamond left. At least, there was one man meant to give him a decent chance!

SITTING his saddle in a thicket of juniper, Mike Reed watched Diamond ride up and waited until he came out of the shack. He had ridden up to surprise the boy and take him home to dinner, but this changed the approval he had grudgingly extended. Whatever was up, he didn't blame the kid too much, but it was enough to stay his appraisal.

Lem had done a good job with the horses. Whether he was seen or not, there was very little that happened on Crazy Dipper that escaped the boss' eye. As old Charley had said, the kid wasn't a fast breaker because he either wouldn't, or couldn't, handle horses rough. But the devotion he won from a horse by gentler means was worth ten times the other kind of wrangling.

Mike Reed had meant to take the boy down today and tomorrow surprise him by having the cavvy brought down from North Pasture to warmer, lower range where the kid could watch the Morgans. But if Diamond was still trailing the kid, there was no telling what was up.

Scowling against the biting wind up here, the rancher turned his horse along a shallow wash and threaded unseen gulches back to his ranch. A few days later he drifted into town and, having a drink at the Oregon, ran into Wild Bill.

"What is this I hear," he asked the marshal, "of a new pass that will bend the Oregon Trail south of this country?"

"Mebbe rumor, mebbe not," Wild Bill told him. "Jim Bridger said the pass is there, but I don't figure it. There're no ranchers in

that country. The old trail is grooved—towns are here and ranchers are beginning to root in."

"They could move damned fast," Mike Reed considered. "If they thought the trail was shifting south." His gaze drifted across to the smooth individual sitting at Diamond's table. "Ain't that Velvet Monte, the gambler that pulled that slick real estate boom at Aintree?"

"The most expensive town that was never built." Wild Bill nodded. "He is probably knee deep in shifting the trail."

Mike Reed's eyes grew very narrow. He said, hard of tone, "Bill, other men tamed this country, but I put down what roots it's got! When I came here, there were no ranches—the trail ran straight through wilderness. I brought in good breed stock, and from it, the ranches, and the part of town that will last, the respectable part, has grown."

The marshal told him softly, "I see your point."

"I wouldn't mind for myself," Reed stated. "But if the trail moves, this country will empty out like a mine town when the bonanza peters out dead. Years of work here will be lost. But they would need ranches and towns to bend this, and how they going to get them first? There is no breed stock south of here clear into Texas."

He stopped dead and stared at Wild Bill. Then he exploded through tight lips. "That kid—he had hoss sense born into his blood!"

Wild Bill threw him a sharp look. "Ain't he still working for you?"

"I wonder!" Mike Reed bit out. "Workin' for me, or just on my pay while he sizes up what's got to be bettered!"

He turned.

Diamond had left his game and was idling along the bar and now he stopped to light a cigar behind the men. Mike Reed turned and laid his piercing gaze upon him. He said, "Diamond, I thought I saw you riding on my grass recently."

Diamond darted him a look above the flame and then slowly shook out the match. "You did," he said easily. "I rode some Thanksgiving supper up to the kid."

Reed stared at him hostilely. "Any time you make a tough ride for that!"

"Well, there was something else beside," Diamond admitted, unruffled. "A message for him drifted through from Texas." Faint mockery glided behind the surfaces of his eyes and then he drifted, without concern, on along the bar.

"There is a strong snake smell about Diamond Spade," Wild Bill noted.

"And anyone tied in with him!" the rancher growled. "Well, I can't fire a man for that. But I can sure test him!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Test

AND test the kid, he did, leaving him up on that freezing range without a friendly word, although he sent Charley up secretly every day to cut sign on weather.

The boy waited sullenly for word to bring the ponies down. The wind no longer simply whistled after sundown. It was a low, whining shriek that sometimes grew into a deafening roar. It was still warm enough to work the horses in midday, but the evenings had turned chill and the nights bitter. He had never known such a desolate lonely world. The country was new to him and he worried about a sudden violent blow that would freeze him up there for the winter. Moving the horses into protected gulches at night with grazing sparser, he was sometimes caught out himself.

Reed just don't give a damn if he kills a man or not! he told himself bitterly. *What I ought to do is just drift and leave his danged horses up here.*

He filled with a smoldering, corrosive anger. When two days before Christmas his pony slipped on trail ice and shook him up badly, his rage exploded. He gathered every pony and cow and, without orders, drove them down onto the lower range and left them.

He rode over to the ranch house and found Reed in his office and growled angrily, "I brought the cavvy down."

"Yes," Reed nodded without looking up, having watched the way the boy handled the horses on a bad trail for two hours through a telescope. "Here's yore pay." He looked up then. "You quitting?"

"Why should I freeze to death for you when I can ride top hand for any other hoss ranch?" he demanded on a tight boyish note.

"Can you?" the rancher asked.

"I got an offer right now," the boy told him with boasting pride he could not restrain. "Seventy-five a month."

"That is more than I'd pay, even for my Morgans," Reed commented. "And my Morgans take good handlers—the best."

"This job is Morgans," the kid crowed. It did him a heap of good to say that and see the expression that crossed Reed's face.

"Unh," the boss grunted finally. "All right. What shape is yore cavvy in?"

"They're busted good enough," the boy growled, but he looked away. The rancher said nothing. He simply counted out his pay.

Diamond put on a big private spread for the kid that night and from the way he talked, people got the idea that the boy had proven up just about the toughest and trickiest horse-breaker in the country. With the warm food

and drink and the riproaring friendliness around him, he began to feel his place again. He expanded under the treatment of the crowd. By mid-evening he was swaggering and full of pride.

A dangerous pride, Belle Keats thought, because under it he was still burning. He was full of Reed's injustice and ready to retaliate in any way.

She got him alone and asked straight out, "What happened, kid? And you tell me the truth!"

The kid made a harsh gesture. "Aw, Belle, he was trying to freeze me to death! I been a damned fool to take it."

"The devil!" she breathed. "He can be one, too. But you shouldn't have quit."

The boy looked at her with smoldering eyes. "Why not? Let him worry on his own scrubs!"

"This has nothing to do with him," Belle said. "You quit on yourself. You left that job before it was finished."

The kid glared sullenly at the table. "I done busted those bonehead mustangs proper. That was what I said I'd do."

She said, "You know better than that, kid. Those ponies aren't ready to work cattle this spring."

He got up abruptly, his face dark with anger. "All right—to hell with 'em! I don't have to dirty my hands with that kind of trash." He swaggered away and joined some of Diamond's toughs and had too much to drink.

It was that way all week, and he was at an age when a week can mould the pattern of a man's life. His arrogance swelled like a cloud.

Diamond watched all this with a smooth satisfaction in his glittering eyes. The kid was mad as hops at Reed and Diamond kept building him up as the best gentler and trainer north of Texas, to further his anger. Also, it got the kid to blowing off about Texas quite a bit, which also worked in with Diamond's plans.

"I'll hand it to you," Velvet allowed to Diamond with admiration. "For getting the angles tangled, yo're aces. We're going to walk off with this whole damned country inside two or three years. And all on a trick—if we can keep that kid out of sight!"

"He'll stay out of sight—or get put there for good."

BELLE watched all this and caught the undercurrents without fully figuring the thing out. Probably, the morals of a big swindle and stampeding a whole ranch country would not have bothered her in any case. But the thing that was happening to the kid raised her ruff. What he needed, she decided from her deep knowledge of men, was something to shake him up into a good look at himself.

On New Year's day she rode out to Jed Healey's ranch. For some reason, Jed's ranch was the first place runaway horses headed for. They had been with men long enough to learn their tricks, and they had been treated mean enough to fill them with hate, and many of them were dangerous killers.

Belle said, "Jed, I want the toughest killer you have got. I want to buy him."

He stared at her. "Last night hit you that bad?"

"No," she told him seriously. "I want the kid to break it for me."

Healey let out a rough, enormous laugh. "I thought you liked him."

"I do," Belle said levelly.

"Well," he scratched his head. "It is a queer kind of liking, but yore business. I'll have a whirlwind in the breaking corral end of the week."

She nodded and rode back to town and spread her bold charm around the kid. It was easy enough to get him to offer to break the horse. Just a suggestion, a few half-uttered hopes before other men.

"Why, Belle," the boy told her largely, "I'll make that critter give you his hoof to shake in fifteen days!" He said that to her, but it was a boast he made to all Cheyenne, for Healey had brought in word that Belle's horse was the Piute Killer.

The kid rode out with the arrogance of a matador and cocky as an eagle. The things his father had taught him had to do with winning a horse's trust. You hung around them, talked to them, sang to them, fed them. You moved in with them, just casually, letting them get used to your smell and feel. They still bucked like the devil when you went to break them, but it was a different thing. Maybe they were sore at the saddle and bridle, but they weren't afraid of you.

The kid moved out to the ranch and began his gentling. The horse was a mean critter, with a Roman nose and the white circles of a bad actor around its eyes, and in the center of them, a bitter memory of man's cruelty. The kid took his time and didn't pay much attention to that. He just hung around the corral, singing, talking anything that came to him.

But there were no women nor poker nor excitement out here, and Healey was not the kind to give homage to any man. He had the boys out moving stock to winter range and the kid had a lot of time to think. The things he thought about were the things that had meant a good deal to him. He remembered the last breakfast at home, and his father's last words, and somehow it brought to mind that cavvy of horses over at Crazy Dipper.

Tough cow hands would take those horses in the spring and finish their breaking while working them. But he had not really done his job.

He tried to hide this from himself, making excuses one minute and riding on his built-up arrogance the next. But the knowledge of his own weakness was like a stain in him.

He had the killer pretty well used to him and, as it had once been broken and ridden, he gave only two days to bridling and saddling it again before he got in leather. The horse gave him a fight, but not as fierce as he expected. He was feeling pretty cocky when he took it out on the trail.

The horse moved stiffly and tensely, and after a time the kid recognized this was not with some trick in its mind . . . the horse was scared of its footing. He talked to it, and gradually the animal loosened up, but when it struck bad ice, it slipped and its muscles locked. The two went down and when the horse scrambled up, it was shivering.

It was not the shivering that held the kid's attention. It was the look in the horse's eye. The horse was not so much angry as afraid—afraid of him! But not in the way he had been afraid of another man dimly in its memory—what it was afraid of was some uncertainty the kid felt in himself.

The kid saw that, and knew it, and went ashen with shock. What he had even kept himself from knowing, the horse had sensed. He had done something costing him self-respect. It was weakness in him that in a pinch would show up in uncertainty for both man and horse.

HE CAME in shaken in his self-esteem, but tried to pass the thing off. The horse would be all right in a day or so, he thought—but the horse wasn't all right. It was fidgety and cut up. It kept cutting up, wilder and madder. On the fifteenth day, when Diamond and Belle and the bunch rode out, the horse went berserk and threw the kid and tried to stomp him.

The kid got out safely and stood, white of lip and shaken, outside the corral.

Diamond was sore beyond all explanation and barked harshly, "And I was going to trust you with my Morgans!"

Wild Bill had moved within hearing distance and his eyes took on a glacial chill. "What Morgans do you have, Diamond?"

Diamond pivoted on a heel and cursed, but gray patches mottled beneath the dark burn of his skin. "Is that yore business?" he demanded.

"It might well be," Wild Bill told him flatly. "Yessir, it might well be, if, say, any of Mike Reed's unbranded ponies were to drift in some blizzard off the range!"

"One of these days yo're going to talk too much, Hickok," Diamond grated. But it was a bluff to save his face. He had tipped his own hand, and been caught at it and now he flung into his saddle and rode away.

The bunch drifted out with him, except Belle, who took the kid inside to rub and strap up his sprains. Rubbing oil into his shoulder she asked wisely, "Know what really happened, kid?"

"Yeah," he mumbled. "My pa told me before I left home."

"It doesn't matter about the horse," she said.

"No," he corrected, stubbornly forcing this through his burning shame. "It matters. One of these days I aim to bust and gentle it like I said. But first, I got something else to do, if I still got the chance. I got to eat dirt, but I am going to try it."

"Go back and finish your job at Crazy Dipper?"

"You think Mr. Reed would gimme a chance? I don't care about the pay. I jist want the chance to finish up busting them scrubs proper." There was no arrogance left in him now. He was just a big-eyed, humble kid again.

Mike Reed's dry voice came from the other room. "You figure yo're man enough to put those scrubs in real working shape by spring?"

"I'll sure try hard," the kid swallowed.

"You better," Mike Reed grunted. "I want you to take over those Morgans first day of green grass. And you got another hoss to gentle before that."

The kid uttered a question, but it only sounded like a squeak.

"The Morgan yo're goin' to ride," Mike told him. "You don't think I'd let you drift my blood stock on that lunkhead of yore's, do you?"

He stood in the door and stared hard at the color flooding in waves through the boy's face and neck. "Or would you rather ride for Diamond?"

"No, sir," the boy swallowed, and dropped his eyes with a youthful disillusionment. He had a good idea now why Diamond had wanted him so bad. If Crazy Dipper was rustled of unbroken Morgans and Diamond turned up on that planned new trail with gentled and trained Morgans for sale, it would be hard proving he had rustled them. There were plenty of good tough wranglers in that country, but blamed few men with the gentleness and humbleness to really train a blooded horse.

"You ain't going to ask me no more, are you?" the boy asked desperately.

"Ah!" Reed breathed and was completely rid of doubts. "No more, Lem. What a man knows he can keep to himself."

TALES of the

by LEE

PEARL HART

(LADY STAGE-ROBBER)

FROM A SELECT CANADIAN GIRLS' BOARDING-SCHOOL TO THE YUMA ARIZ., PENITENTIARY FOR STAGE ROBBERY AT GUN POINT WAS THE INCONGRUOUS BEGINNING & END OF THE CAREER OF PEARL HART, LAST OF THE OLD WEST'S LONG LINE OF PICTURESQUE ROAD-AGENTS.

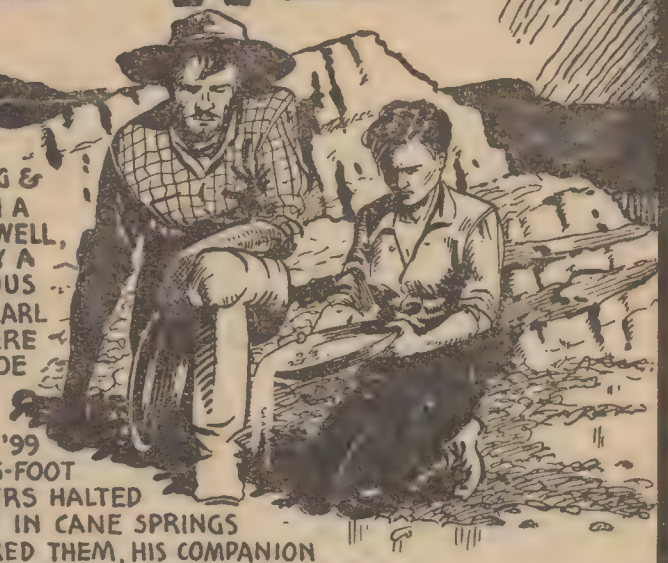
AS THE FIRST STEP PEARL--BORN PEARL TAYLOR IN LINDSAY, ONTARIO --SHOCKED SCHOOLMATES AND FACULTY BY ELOPING WITH A TINHORN GAMBLER NAMED HART.

BUT THE GLAMOUR, IF ANY, OF LIFE WITH A GAMBLING MAN WORE THIN AS THEY DRIFTED FROM ONE SMALL TOWN TO ANOTHER, & HAD DISAPPEARED COMPLETELY WHEN THEY REACHED THE WORLD'S COLUMBIA EXPOSITION AT CHICAGO, WHERE HART BECAME A SHILL FOR WILD WEST SHOWS.

THERE PEARL HEARD GLOWING TALES--ALL SECOND-HAND-- OF THE BOLD BAD GUN-FIGHTERS, STAGE ROBBERS & THEIR COURAGEOUS WOMEN FOLK, AND LIT OUT FOR THE GREAT OPEN SPACES WHERE A LADY OF SPIRIT WAS APPRECIATED.

INSTEAD OF QUEENING IT OVER AN OUTLAW BAND, HOWEVER, SHE FOUND HERSELF WASHING DISHES IN MINING CAMP & RANCH COOKSHACKS.

OLD WEST



UNSUCCESSFUL FREIGHTING & PROSPECTING VENTURES WITH A GOOD-NATURED NE'ER-DO-WELL, JOE BOOT, WERE CLIMAXED BY A LETTER TELLING OF THE SERIOUS ILLNESS OF HER MOTHER. PEARL NEEDED QUICK MONEY & THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAY, SHE & JOE FIGURED, TO GET IT.

ON A MAY AFTERNOON IN '99 A BEARDED MAN & A SLIM 5-FOOT "BOY" BRANDISHING REVOLVERS HALTED THE BENSON-GLOBE STAGE IN CANE SPRINGS CANYON. WHILE THE MAN COVERED THEM, HIS COMPANION RELIEVED THE PASSENGERS OF $450. THEN GALLANTLY RETURNING EACH $1 SUPPER MONEY, THEY GALLOPED OFF UP A MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

BUT INSTEAD OF SEEKING A PREPARED HIDEOUT, PEARL AND JOE AMATEURISHLY BACK-TRACKED A COUPLE OF TIMES TO BAFFLE PURSUIT--AND BECAME HOPELESSLY LOST. AFTER 5 DAYS' WANDERING, WHICH COVERED SOME 30 MILES AS THE CROW FLIES, THEY WERE OVERTAKEN BY A SHERIFF'S POSSE.

FOR HER PART IN THE WORLD'S WORST STAGE ROBBERY PEARL BECAME A NINE DAY WONDER, TERMINATING WITH HER MOTHER'S RECOVERY & HER OWN SENTENCE TO 10 YEARS IN THE YUMA PENITENTIARY. PAROLED AFTER LESS THAN 3 SHE VANISHED INTO RESPECTABILITY.

21-77

Even before he reached the horse, Ben knew the rider was Rudy. . . .

BORN TO KILL

By THOMAS THOMPSON

Bullets were the kid's birthright, a hangrope his heritage—and not even his father knew which end of the rope he'd stretch!

ICE-SHEATHED death, like the devil's own knife, came out of the north that night and left old Ben Crawford alone with his thoughts and his dying cattle. The wind howled dismally, paused, then pounded the house in bellowing gusts. Through the fitful lulls the cries of the cattle drifted up the slope and cut into a man's soul. Mattie, his wife, appeared not to notice, and when she called from the darkened bedroom where she sat swathed in blankets, her voice sounded cheerful and full of hope.

"Is he coming yet, Ben?"

He turned from the window where he had made a tiny peep hole in the frosted pane and went back into the dark bedroom. The darkness oppressed him some, but the doctor said it would be better if her eyes did not get too much light. There was nothing he could say to her.

She said, "He's a good boy, Ben."

It wasn't true, but Ben found himself wondering how many mothers had made that same statement, even with their sons dangling from the end of a rope. Not that their boy Rudy was that far gone, but Ben figured he was well on the road. It's not easy for a man to see his only son take more interest in a six-

shooter than he does in cattle. Especially when six-shooters stood for what they did in the history of the Crawford family. For a second Ben was glad that the wind was howling. It covered the quick catch in his throat.

"The letter says he's got a surprise for us," she went on.

It was like she was talking to herself, Ben thought, and there seemed to be a quality in her voice that reminded him of the day fifty years ago when he had asked her to go west and share his life. The wind caught the eaves of the house and the roof groaned under the strain—a reminder that a surprise from Rudy might be a strange thing.

"Remember when he was a little tyke, how he used to bring me flowers? Or an arrowhead, sometimes?"

Flowers or an arrowhead, Ben thought grimly. That was like Rudy. Soft, sentimental, easy-going—and as hard as flint. He was glad that Mattie hadn't been able to see that callousness in Rudy's face the last time he dropped by. He was heading west, that time, and riding fast. He'd needed money—and a few days later a stranger had dropped by the ranch and asked questions.

The wind was dying down now, and the quiet hissing told of the snow that was gathering for a long stay. Ben patted his wife's hand and went back to the front room. "You mustn't get your heart too set on it," he said over his shoulder. "What with the storm and all—" He was thinking that a man who rode as mysteriously as his son did might not always be able to choose his route.

"Rudy wouldn't disappoint me," Mattie said.

The wind was gone now and the audible silence of the snow lay over the blue white night and muffled the complaining of the cattle. Ben took a heavy coat from a peg on the wall and slipped it around his shoulders. Best get out while he had a chance and see if he couldn't drive some of the stock back to the shelter of the wooded draws. If he hitched up the wagon and scattered some hay here and there—it was impossible to warm the coldness knotting the pit of his stomach with thoughts of household chores.

IT WASN'T the first time he had driven the wagon alone, stopping to loop the lines around the brake while he went back and pitched off the hay. With two men the wagon could keep moving and the job could be done in a third of the time. Some of the old-timers in the valley had sons who helped. He called to Mattie and told her not to worry and then went out into the night.

The team stood patiently while he put on the heavy harness, straining under the exertion. He wasn't as young as he once was. Even a little spread like this was a man-sized job when a man worked alone. But it was all he had, and he couldn't let go. He had thought some of selling out. Maybe he could get enough money to take care of the operation Mattie needed, but there were the years ahead. Ranchers weren't hiring old men these days except maybe as cooks or wranglers. It would do Mattie more harm than good to see him working for wages after all these years.

Ben tried to think back in his mind to discover when it was that he and his son had become strangers. There didn't seem to be any particular time. Maybe it was when Mattie began to lose her vision and Rudy had tried to talk his dad into selling the ranch. Ben had been worried and upset that night and he had been sharp in his condemnation of the boy. If he'd get out and work like other boys in the valley—

Rudy had tried to explain that there were other things a man might do. And then he had shown Ben the new Colt's .45 and had amazed his father with the speed with which the gun left the holster and with some really good shooting. It had been like a slap in the face to Ben. Two of his brothers and his father had died in gunsmoke trying to make their own law.

Ben climbed into the wagon stiffly and drove the team out into the raw night. Over near the cottonwood grove he found a huddle of steers and he stopped the wagon long enough for them to come toward him. Then he drove slowly on toward the box canyon where the steep walls shut out the wind. Here he stopped and began to fork down hay. He'd circle around and pick up more stock and by morning he should have quite a few of them out of the weather—

The off bay whinnied and turned quickly to peer from behind his blinders. The cattle lifted their heads. Ben strained his eyes into the darkness and saw the horse and rider coming slowly out of the night like ice sheathed ghosts.

The horse stopped near the wagon, its breath clouding in the pale air. The rider clung to the saddle horn and his head was slumped forward on his chest. When the horse stopped the rider's body jerked and he slid crazily in the saddle. Ben jumped down quickly, a cold fear in his heart. Even before he reached the horse he knew that the rider was Rudy. When he got closer he could see the large stain where blood had seeped through the mackinaw.

He acted on instinct now. He led the horse close to the wagon and half lifted the lifeless body onto the hay. For a quick second he held his breath while he dug his hand under the mackinaw and felt the still body. There was warmth there and a slight beating. He looped

the reins of the riderless horse through a stake hole on the wagon bed and turned the team back toward the barn. The cattle could wait.

It had stopped snowing and the clouds were breaking and tumbling in a high wind. The moon peered through timidly and splotched its yellow against the white. A crust was forming on the light covering of snow and the deepening cold was visible in its intensity.

He stopped the wagon near the door of the house and worked at lifting Rudy's body down. As he held the boy close he felt a strain of emotion, but he put it aside and half dragged the body into the house. Mattie heard and called, her voice frightened.

"It's all right, Mattie," Ben said, keeping his voice level. "It's Rudy. He's hurt, but he'll be all right in a minute."

He heard her quick gasp and then she came out of the bedroom, feeling her way along the wall. Ben went to her and guided her to a chair.

"He needs me, Ben," she said. "I was always the one he came to when he needed help."

"I'll get him to bed," Ben said slowly. "He'll be all right."

"Take me to him."

"Not now, Mattie," Ben said softly. "Wait until I get him to bed."

He went outside to get snow to rub on the blueing hands and face. The cold air blasted against his body and seemed to freeze his heart. Right now it didn't make any difference what Rudy had done in the past.

The saddled black still stood at the tail of the wagon, eating hay. Ben went to loosen the cinch and take off the bridle. He saw the saddle bags tied behind the cantle and he moved to free them. He looked through the gear. There was no blanket roll.

He lifted the saddle bags free and was caught unaware by their weight. They slipped from his cold fingers and dropped to the snow and the dim light from the front window winked back from the spilled gold coin. Old Ben felt his heart slow down, but he stooped and picked up the money and returned it to the saddle bag. Inside the house Mattie was calling for him to hurry. He wondered if she had discovered the bullet wound.

For some crazy reason he thought of the time Rudy had accidentally killed one of Jack Middlewood's steers and how he had covered up for Rudy. Middlewood was an unreasonable cuss and one steer wasn't going to break him—it was a man's place to help his son when he was in trouble. He hefted the saddle bags and the gold was heavy in his hands. Then he hurried over to the barn, taking the gold and Rudy's horse with him.

There'd be others coming after this gold. A sheriff and a posse might pick up the trail now that it had stopped snowing. Ben broke the ice from the horse trough with an axe and let Rudy's horse sniff the water. Then he spilled a bait of oats into one of the feed boxes. Taking the saddle bags of money and the horse's bridle he climbed up into the loft and buried the articles deep in the hay. After that he hurried back to the house, the breath panting in his lungs.

MATTIE was sitting near where he had laid Rudy, and her hands were feeling the cold still face. She was crying softly, and it made a strange, weird picture, the tears in her sightless eyes.

She heard Ben enter the room and she said, "He wouldn't disappoint me, Ben. That's why he tried to ride through the storm—he was always like that, Ben. Never do a thing to hurt me."

Ben cursed softly to himself and felt a quick smarting in his eyes. He examined Rudy quickly and ascertained that the bullet had entered his back, high on the left side and had traveled down, coming out just below his collar bone. Loss of blood and exposure had driven a lot of life from the kid's body. Ben hurried to the kitchen and put water on the stove.

He thought of another time when he had heated water for his brother—they had been too late that time. Ben had had a cold hatred for guns after that. They were a curse, and they claimed someone out of each Crawford generation.

He suddenly had a strange feeling that if his son had turned bad it must have been a fault in training someplace along the line—it wouldn't be Mattie's fault. She had tried to understand the boy. He went back to the front room and Mattie turned her face and met his eyes. For a second he had a strange feeling that she could see him.

"He's wounded, isn't he Ben?" she asked softly.

"That doesn't mean anything," Ben said fiercely. "Might've been an accident."

"What difference does it make, Ben?" she said. "He's our boy. There's cloth in that drawer near the flour bin. Bring it in and I'll fix some bandages."

Together they got the boy into bed and Ben washed the wound where the blood had caked and bound it up with the bandages Mattie tore for him. She wanted to stay near then and he did not have the heart to make her leave. There was a bottle of whiskey in the cupboard and he forced some between Rudy's lips. The boy opened his eyes and mumbled his recognition. Ben left them there together and went back outside.

The clouds had scudded aside now, and the tracks of his wagon and the trail of Rudy's

horse stood out like dark puddles of shadow in the crusted snow. He thought again of the manhunters who would be searching for that trail and he hurried on to the barn.

For a minute he thought of unsaddling the black, then decided against it. He slipped a rope around the animal's neck, making a loop by holding it with his hand, and led the horse outside. With a bellyful of oats and no bridle to interfere it would make out all right. He headed it toward the broken country to the east, then jerking the rope free he lashed the animal across the rump. The horse snorted its surprise and jogged off a short distance to stand stiff legged, eyes rolling in distrust. Ben followed and lashed out again with the rope, waving his hat at the spooked animal as he did. The horse broke into a run, the empty, flopping stirrups adding to its fear. Ben watched it disappear into the night and went back to the house.

It was near morning when he heard the sound of horses. Rudy had gained consciousness, but he did not speak to them. His breathing was easier and there was a soft glow of fever in his cheeks. At times he slept fitfully and mumbled. Ben led Mattie away and made her go to bed. He did not want her to hear what Rudy might say.

The horses were nearer now and Ben took his rifle from behind the door and went out toward the barn. Ten riders pulled up in a swirl of kicked snow. The moon was gone and they sat like muffled black boulders on their mishappen mounts. One man rode ahead and did the talking. Ben tried to place the voice. It was not Sheriff Lenton, he felt sure, but then there were other counties and other sheriffs.

"Seen a rider come this way?" the man asked. His voice was heavy and there was a quick nervousness in his tone. Must be a stranger, Ben thought. Sheriff Lentor or any of the men from town would know Rudy.

"Can't say I've seen nobody," Ben said.

"Then what the hell you doing up at this hour?" the man snapped.

"Tryin' to work some of my stock back into the draws," Ben said easily. "Had the wagon out, forkin' down a little hay—" He jerked his thumb toward the barn where the wagon stood, the team still harnessed. There was a quick movement from the man on the horse and Ben could see the dull light reflecting on the six-shooter.

"He had a bullet in him," the rider said. "He couldn't go far and he was headed this way."

Ben wondered if maybe Sheriff Lenton had called in help, not wanting to go through this with Ben himself.

"Start talking," the man on the horse said. "Or maybe you'd like us to look around."

"That ain't necessary," Ben said slowly. His voice sounded tired. "He was here and fed his horse. Then he rode off again."

"Maybe he didn't," another rider said. "Maybe we better look."

"I'll get a lantern and show you his tracks," Ben said slowly.

"That's more like it," the leader said.

Ben took the lantern from its hook inside the barn door. The light spluttered as he applied the match, then flared up and evened out when he closed the globe. He walked from the barn, the shadows of his legs fanning out in huge blackness before him. Near the door he stopped and held the lantern high. The light fell on the muddy, tracked-up snow where Rudy's horse had turned and shied from him.

"It was right here he made me feed the horse," Ben said.

"Guess he ain't as bad hurt as we thought," the leader said.

"Then he rode off this way," Ben said, following the trail with the lantern.

"Looks all right," the leader said. "Let's give it a try, boys. He can't get far, and if this old coot is lyin' it won't take us long to get back." They spurred their mounts and thundered off into the night, their horses' hoofs making a queer crunching sound in the frozen snow.

Ben put down the lantern and went slowly back to the house. He could still hear the sound of the horses in the distance and they seemed to be ringing a death knell in his ears. For a second he felt a quick flare of hatred, then he went into the room and saw Rudy lying there.

THE boy's eyes were open and they lighted when they saw his dad. One hand was on top of the covers and he motioned for Ben to come near. The old man bent over his son and remembered nights a long time back when he had done the same when the wind was shaking this room and the boy could not sleep.

"Get help, dad," the boy said. The three words seemed to tire him and he closed his eyes and lay still a long time. Then he said, "Riders—coming after me. Money—"

"Don't you worry none, son," Ben said. "I know all about it and you ain't to worry. I'll do what I can."

Rudy closed his eyes and dropped off into a calm sleep. Old Ben went into the front room and took down two rifles. He loaded them and then got his six-shooter from a dresser drawer. He hated to touch the thing. He had promised himself that he wouldn't—that there would be one Crawford who would not depend on a gun. But law or no law, they weren't going to take Rudy until he was well.

And then, by God, they'd take him where he'd get a fair trial—

Mattie called from the other room. "Anything wrong, Ben? Is Rudy all right?"

"You dern right he's all right," Ben said fiercely. "You go back to sleep and don't you worry about our boy."

He made a cup of coffee and sat down to wait. Now and then he could hear Rudy mumbling in his sleep and once he got up and went in to pull the covers tighter. He stood there for a second, looking down on the face that just a few years back had been so small and helpless against that same pillow and he wondered where it was he had failed the boy. There was a hard lump forming in his throat, so he turned and went back into the front room. He had a strange feeling of being alone. Mattie had her world of shadows and Rudy had his heritage of guns—he stood apart, unable to understand either.

Ben found himself thinking back to the last time Rudy had been home. He should have talked to him then, but he couldn't. It was the same thing he had heard from his brother—they wanted to be lawmen, and they had—small time deputies, then city marshals in roaring trail towns. It was an easy step from law-sided killings to twisted trails. It seemed to be a pattern that Crawfords followed. He had felt a sudden surge of fear and anger and he had walked away from the boy.

There was a clattering of hoofs and the creak of leather out front and Ben Crawford opened the door. He stood there outlined in the patch of light and some of the light spilled around him and splashed on the faces of the group of riders. They were all strangers—bearded men with the same haunted fear in their eyes he had noticed in Rudy's eyes. The man who had talked to him before was getting off his horse and coming forward. He grabbed Ben by the shirt front and held him close.

"You lied to us," the man said hoarsely. "Where's the money?"

"What money?"

"Don't fool with me, damn you," the man said. His hand came up and smashed into Ben's mouth. "Where's the money?"

"I don't know."

"Don't waste my time," the man said, slapping Ben across the mouth.

Ben felt a quick thrill. He didn't know what difference it made, but these men were not lawmen. They were outlaws themselves. probably the gang Rudy rode with and had turned against—maybe Rudy planned on going straight.

He knew that was idle hope. More likely Rudy had double-crossed them. But at any rate he wasn't going to see his boy taken by a gang of cutthroats. He'd give them the money, that was it. It was tainted money at best. He'd give it to them and then help the posse run them down when the sheriff and his men arrived. Maybe it would make it easier for Rudy.

"All right," he said slowly. "I'll show you where it is."

He took them to the barn and he lighted the lantern before climbing up into the loft. When he had pushed the hay aside and exposed the loot the leader of the men grabbed it hungrily and held the saddle bags close.

"That's better, old man," the leader said. "Now where's the kid?"

"You said you just wanted the money," Ben said. "You got it, and that's all you'll get."

"Say, wait a minute, Clint," one of the others said. "Crawford has got folks around here, remember? I'll bet this is his old man."

"That's right," Ben said. He hated to take charity from killers, but maybe they would leave him alone if they knew.

A slow grin crossed the face of the man called Clint. "Is that so?" he said softly. Then drawing his gun and shoving it into Ben's middle he said, "Where's the kid?"

Ben's hand tightened on the lantern bail. "He's dead," he said softly. "I took the money and hid it here. I figured on using it—"

Clint's face expanded into a wide grin. "You owe me two bucks, Shorty. Told you I killed the dirty son."

Ben felt a tight twisting rage tearing at his vitals. He started to climb down from the loft.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Shorty said. "I don't like this business—"

"Soon as I get rid of this old buck. He knows too much."

CLINT raised his gun and Ben saw the hammer come back and swung the lantern with all his might and smashed it into the gunman's face. He threw himself from the loft and cleared the manger at a bound. For a second there was inky darkness, then small trickles of light started slashing against the shingled roof as the kerosene-soaked hay caught fire.

Ben ran toward the house his every muscle straining. He had his hand on the door knob when the first shot sounded and he felt his left leg cave in beneath him. He tugged the door open and dove inside, snatching up his rifle as he did. Then he dragged himself to the window, knocked out the pane and leveled his rifle at the men who were running wildly from the burning barn. Behind him he could hear Rudy's voice and the creaking of the bed springs.

It was not only that he was fighting for his life and Mattie's life and Rudy's life—it

was not only that he was fighting against the man who had wounded his boy. Rather it was like fighting against an evil that had haunted him and blasted the life of his family for generations. These were the men who represented the thing that had taken Rudy from them.

He lined his sights on the man called Shorty and while the gun was kicking against his shoulder he saw the man fall forward. Four more times he fired, and three of the shots were good. Then the men were clear of the barn and started pouring their fire into the house.

He moved quickly from the window, unable to face the stream of lead that had found his hiding place. He heard a sound and saw Mattie feeling her way along the wall. Her face was white and there was a dull fear tugging the muscles around her sightless eyes. He went to her, as best he could, pulling his wounded leg behind him. "You go back, Mattie," he said softly. "That's the safest place for you."

"I want to be with Rudy," she said.

He guided her toward the door, then turned his back on the two of them and went back to the front of the house. Kneeling near the fireplace he checked the second rifle and the six-shooter. Then, taking a deep breath, he turned his attention to the men outside.

Ben had emptied the second rifle and was starting on his six-shooter when he got his first good look at Clint, the leader. Ben had never been much of a hand with a six-gun—but Clint, the man who had shot Rudy and bet two dollars on his life, was standing near the corner of a shed, his body more than half exposed. Ben took the pistol and sighted slowly, like with his rifle, and he let the barrel drop down upon its target. The window frame was in his way so he stood up. Once more he leveled the pistol. Then he squeezed—slowly. Clint moved and Ben lowered the gun to let his arm rest.

It was perhaps two seconds before Clint shifted his position and came into view again, but it seemed like two years. Ben lined the gun and fired. He knew at once that his bullet had gone wide and the flash of muzzle flame gave away his position to the men outside. There was a sudden clatter of gunfire and Ben felt a bullet smash against his shoulder and it knocked him to the floor. He gave a quick cry—tried to hold it back—then the pain hit him again and he could not control the sounds that came from his lips.

There was a movement from the doorway and he saw Mattie coming slowly from the room. Rudy was with her, guiding her steps, and he had a six-shooter in his hand.

Ben tried to stop them, but they moved on like a couple of half-things that could not be separated or else they would fall. Rudy leaned heavily against his mother for support, and she clung to him as he guided her steps toward the window. There was a crash of fire from Rudy's gun—Ben saw him turn and come slowly back. Mattie's head was high and proud. Then the night shook with the yells of men and smashing gunfire.

SHERIFF LENTON was the first man through the door. His eyes were wide with fear, but when he saw Ben he dropped to one knee and started pumping questions.

"If you got them all, the money's out there," Ben said slowly. He let his hand stray to the six-shooter on the floor. His fingers closed around it. "Rudy's here, sheriff, but he's staying here until he gets well."

"Ain't he told you yet?" the sheriff asked.

"I guessed," Ben said dully. "When I saw the money—"

The sheriff left him, hurrying toward the room where Mattie was calling to him. Ben cursed. He didn't want Mattie to hear about it just yet. Then Lenton's voice was booming from the other room.

"You did it, Rudy! Clint Casson is out there colder than a turkey. Guess that five thousand reward will pay for the operation, won't it?"

Ben heard Mattie's voice, choked with tears. "What's more important, he's being assigned here and we'll all be together. Just think, sheriff. Our boy a United States Marshal—"

"And a damn good one, too," the sheriff said. Ben could hear Mattie fussing around with the covers and then the sheriff came out and gave orders to get Ben into bed. "We come as fast as we could after we found Rudy's horse," the sheriff said. "Then when we saw the barn burning we really busted ourselves—"

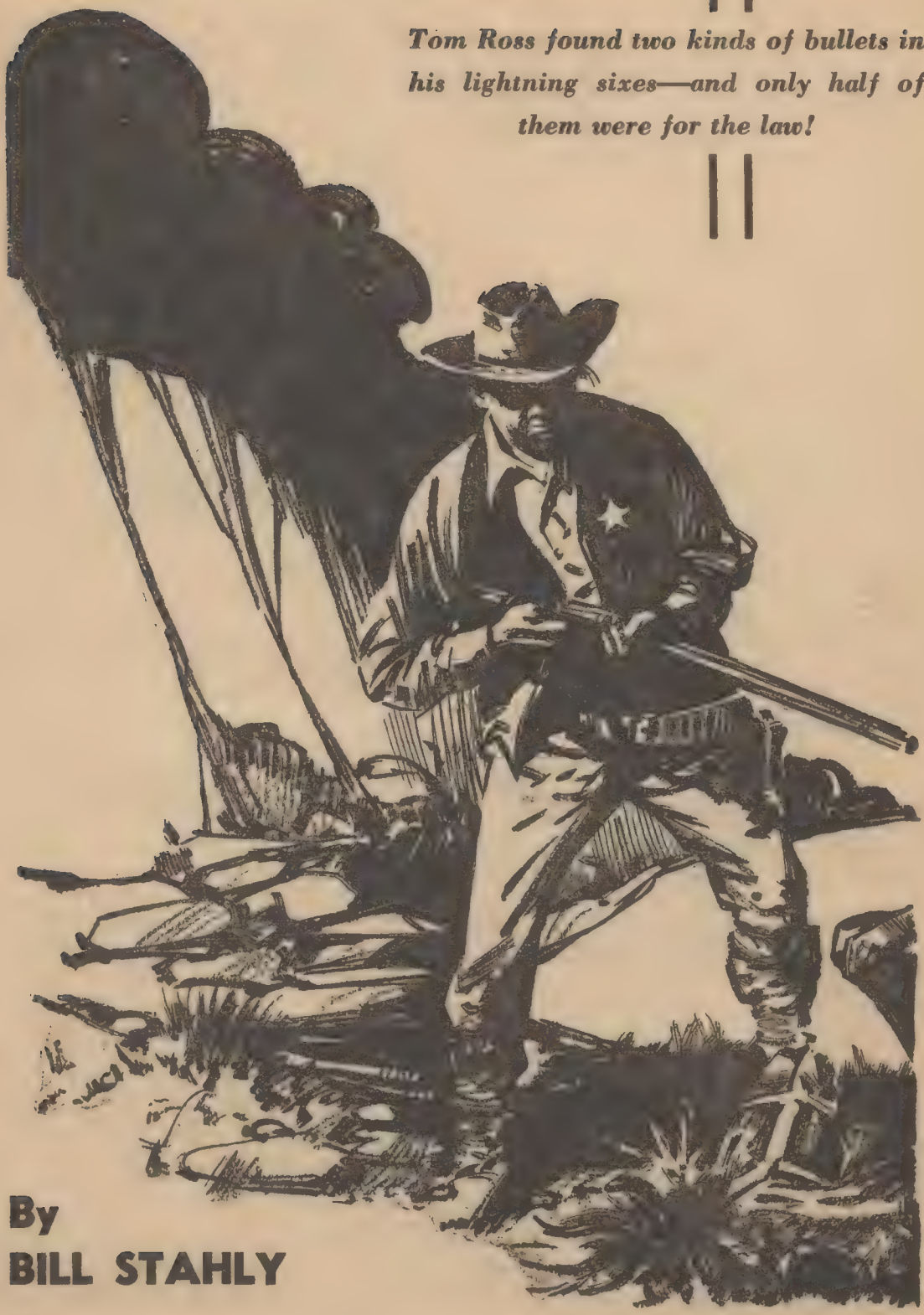
Ben sat there in the middle of the floor, staring foolishly, until they put him to bed and made Rudy comfortable and the sheriff promised that a doctor would be along in an hour or so. Then he looked from one Crawford to the other and he blew his nose. "Fine lookin' family," he snorted. "Takes all three of you to hold each other up."

Ben thought about that for a while. It was the truth, and that was the way a family should be. Mattie came and laid her hand on his forehead.

"I knew that was what he wanted," Mattie said. "But after we didn't hear from him for so long I was afraid to tell you. I knew how you felt—" She fumbled along the covers and found his hand. "Were you surprised?"

Ben took a deep breath. "Why in hell should I be?" he said testily. "He's always been a good boy, ain't he?"

Tom Ross found two kinds of bullets in his lightning sixes—and only half of them were for the law!



By
BILL STAHLY

NONE BUT THE TOUGH

II

CHAPTER ONE

Gunsmoke Comeback

TOM ROSS, was leaning from the saddle and hazing the rump of a stolen steer with a rope's end, when the sharp sound of a rifle echoed against the narrow canyon's rock walls. Up-canyon a dozen rifles next spoke commandingly. Tom did not hear even one replying shot.

He thought, *Jose, Emanuel and Tick must've paid plumb quick. . . .*

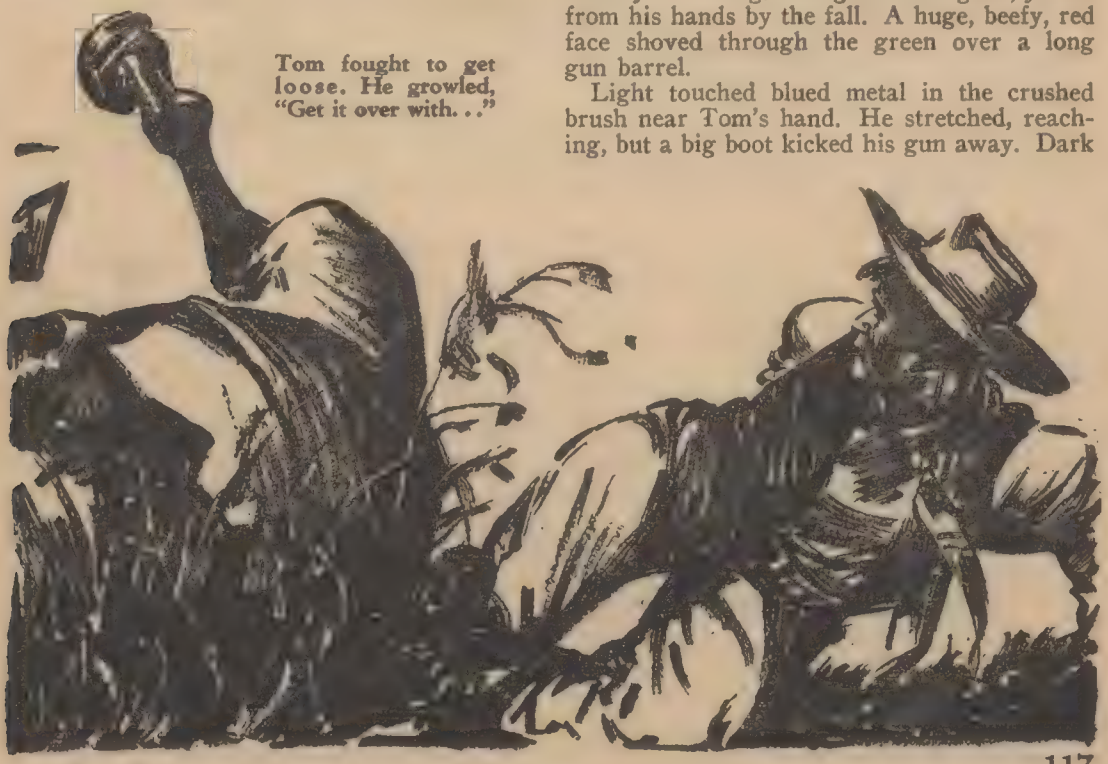
His dark eyes squinted with anger rather than fear as he pulled his horse around. *Trapped!* he thought again as the first gun blazed between two huge granite boulders, down-canyon; then sent a slug riccocheting among the rocks. That gave him a respite and he spurred back—down-canyon was the only way out.

He made the hundred yards to the sparkling creek which, partially hidden by willows, cut into the canyon, before the hard blast of a rifle shot came again. He felt a blow strike his thigh. The bronc shivered under the impact of a second bullet, stumbled and went on. Tom lifted his revolver, snapping a futile shot through the willows and the rifle's bark answered.

Tom felt his bronc going down and attempted to swing free, but the bullet in his leg slowed him. The horse somersaulted and rolled, throwing him into the willows and pinning his leg.

The rustle of the willows and crunch of boots on creek gravel made him twist and strain to free himself, but the horse was lying heavily on his leg. His guns were gone, jarred from his hands by the fall. A huge, beefy, red face shoved through the green over a long gun barrel.

Light touched blued metal in the crushed brush near Tom's hand. He stretched, reaching, but a big boot kicked his gun away. Dark



Tom fought to get loose. He growled, "Get it over with. . ."

blue eyes looked at him coldly from under scraggly brown hair, which came down in wisps like inverted brown grass growing from under a battered gray range hat.

Tom's eyes took in the star pinned to the black vest, then glared back at the man. He grasped the willows and tried to pull himself free. His own rifle was under the bronc's shoulders and he tried to work it loose. That, too, was hopeless.

The man's thick full lips parted in a grin. "Still full o' fight, you young devil?" He raised the rifle deliberately, holding it steady, his deep blue eyes squinted carefully over the sights.

Tom, with both hands clawing at the willows and gravel, tried to pull himself toward the man, pelted him with gravel.

The big man paused, looking closely at him, as though puzzled.

Tom pushed on the dead horse, tried to roll the animal; pulled himself by the willows. The pain of the bullet in his thigh struck him now.

Slowly the red-faced man raised his gun even with Tom's eyes. Tom fought to loosen his leg. Still the man waited. Tom growled, "Get it over with!"

"Tough, ain't you?" The ugly lawman grinned.

"Tough enough."

The sheriff scratched his head, studying Tom. "You look like old Hank Ross. Danged, if you don't. You ain't Tommy Ross?"

"None of your damn business!"

"Why you ridin' with Hatchet Scoles?"

"If you're gonna shoot, shoot."

The sheriff rubbed a stubbly chin, looked back toward the main canyon, spat amber juice meditatively. "You think you're tough—can't say I blame you none. Time was when I thought I was a salty ranny—ate bobbed wire for breakfast an' prickly pear cactus for supper. But I learned to be tougher."

The man came closer and took hold of the bronc's leg starting to roll the animal. "If you think you're so tough, try doin' what I'll tell you."

The man grunted and strained until Tom's leg was loose. Tom crouched ready. So the lawman expected him to run and then bring him down like a rabbit? He dragged his injured leg and started for the man, disregarding the lawman's rifle.

Hoofs pounded down the main canyon. Then a whoop. "Emory!"

The sheriff walked slowly away from Tom, climbed the small bank and spoke to a man beyond the range of Tom's vision. "Here, Fat."

"Sheriff, we got you a string o' good rustlers—dead ones. Got all of 'em up our way. But one of 'em shot at Jack Warring an' got by him. You catch any?"

Emory said, "Reckon he must've got by me down-canyon. Send Jack Warring down to pick me up. One of 'em shot my hoss.

Tom thought of the rifle under his bronc and turned back. Hi Emory came close. "I'll tell you what I want—later, kid. Don't worry 'bout my not findin' you." He grinned. "Now, get on that bronc o' mine an' vamoose, 'fore I change my mind."

Warily Tom started toward Hi Emory's horse.

"Wait," Emory commanded. "Here's your gun." He broke it open and took out the shells. He threw the gun to Tom, who reloaded it under the threat of Hi Emory's rifle and slipped it into his holster. Painfully he climbed on the lawman's horse.

"You're a fool, Emory. I could plug you."

"But you won't. Now, fan that bronc's tail 'fore Jack Warring gets here. He's the man you was tradin' lead with back there an' I saw him git a good look at you."

Tom turned the horse up the small draw.

TOM ROSS did a great deal of thinking while his leg healed during the two weeks in the little hidden valley high in the Scissortail Mountains, temporary headquarters of Hatchet Scoles. Emory's actions bothered him in retrospect so much that when, late one afternoon, Hatchet Scoles rode in with a small band of followers, he thought it was the lawman come to claim his due. Now, at early evening, Scoles was sitting on a log, staring moodily into the fire under the big pines, listening to the strumming of a mandolin.

Half-Spanish, silent, close-lipped, he gave the impression of a man who knew what he wanted and was going after it. Though Tom had been riding with him for five months, he still knew little of the man. He respected Hatchet Scoles' strength, his silence—and what, for want of a better term, you might call his business acumen. Hatchet Scoles was stocking a big ranch in Mexico, and his operations on this side of the border were handled with that in view—and usually went off with the relentless smoothness of clockwork.

Tom left his place beside Carl Dunn, a tall outlaw rider, and walked toward the bandit leader. The firelight glittered in Hatchet Scoles' dark eyes as Tom approached.

"I'm leaving, Hatchet."

"Leaving?"

"I got other commitments. I hadda make a deal to come out of that last shootout."

"Lost your nerve?"

"No."

"Jose and Emanuel and Tick Cummaro *got killed.* What was your deal?"

Tom grinned. "Don't know—yet."

But Scoles seemed to sense the strain in his voice. Hatchet said, "You came to me when your old man died—shot. You made your deal then—with me—for a new start. Now you want to quit. Why? Ever hear of a hombre named Hi Emory."

"I'm not riding with you any more, Hatchet."

"You are tomorrow. We're raiding his D spread, east of Cibola."

"Never again with your outfit." Tom came out in a sweat. Was this what Emory had wanted from him—to turn the tables on Scoles?

"Fine talk from a man that led Jose and Emanuel and Tick Cummaro into a trap."

"The hell! You sent us to pick up that beef, while you and rest of the men had easy going on the Box C. You just used us as a decoy to get the sheriff out of your way. I'm through being played for a fool."

"Nobody is ever through with Hatchet Scoles."

"I am. I've done a lot more than most men would, coming and telling you I'm through, instead of just drifting."

"You came back because you had a bullet in your leg and wanted help. Now that we've fixed you up you've turned yellow." Hatchet Scoles' voice was hard, clipped. "You know too much about our bunch to quit."

The rest of the men were beyond the fire. All but Spooky Joe Mellott, Hatchet's sour-faced, scowling *segundo*, who stood in the half-shadows behind Scoles. Tom felt a dry tension in the air and knew that some word of his intentions had been passed to Spooky Joe.

CHAPTER TWO

Badmen Can't Quit

"WE MIGHT'S well have it out," Tom said, stepping carefully around the fire, closer to Hatchet Scoles. "If you got the guts to face me instead of ordering Spooky to bushwhack me when I ride down trail."

Scoles flicked his cigarette into the fire. His only expression was a faint amusement which glinted in his snake-like eyes. He said evenly, emotionlessly, "Any time you're ready."

Hatchet came to his feet, seemingly relaxed, his hands in plain sight in front of him. Tom caught a slight movement on the part of Spooky Joe Mellott as he lunged toward Hatchet Scoles. Scoles' arm rose and Tom saw the flash of firelight on a knife. He drove an uppercut toward Hatchet's jaw, but Hatchet twisted avoiding the blow.

Again the quick flash of light on knife blade distracted him. Tom caught the movement of Spooky Joe, shifting for his shot. Hatchet moved silently aside, as though this were a prearranged maneuver. Spooky Joe waited, silent, motionless as an executioner.

Tom, lunging, felt Hatchet's knife ripping his arm. He drove hammering blows into Hatchet's face, forcing Hatchet between himself and Spooky Joe. He kicked Hatchet's legs, spilling him against Spooky Joe. Then he was plunging into the darkness beyond the firelight. Spooky's gun blazed. Tom dodged through the pines. Curses, yells and gun shots pursued him.

At first he was thankful for the darkness which hid him from Hatchet Scoles' men, but later he cursed the absence of the moon. Through the pines it was easy going, but when he started down the east face of the mountain he found himself hopelessly entangled in the brush. Still, immediate pursuit died.

When the moon came up he began descending a long ridge. It was slow going for a man long accustomed to the saddle. His high-heeled boots hurt his feet. The brush tore his jeans and his shirt was soon ragged. His knife wound pained him now.

By morning he was on a long bench where the pines had given way to low scrub oak. Far below stretched a green valley, with sycamores, cottonwoods and willows along a stream cutting it. Beyond was mauve desert and farther on rose the dark cinder cone of an ancient volcano. The malpais of an ancient lava flow scarred it jaggedly.

The valley, the stream and jagged lava flow stirred Tom's memory as though all this were something half-forgotten, or only partly remembered. He had seen it before, but not from quite this point. As he descended lower into the foothills it came to him. This was Yucca Valley, where his father had been driven from his ranch. Tom, only eleven then, had been familiar with all this country, had ridden from Peach Springs to Haystack Butte and Acquarious Cliffs to Granite Peak.

There was the long flint-like bed of malpais over which he had wandered back from Peach Springs when his burro ran away. He remembered the lava caves he had explored there, the happy days he had spent hunting rabbits.

That was when all the long valley was free range for his father's cattle. That was before a big Texas outfit had shoved in, driving his father from his hard-won success—before Tom, seeing his father shot, his mother dying in the desert, had turned against the big spread owners, had made himself an enemy of what men called law.

He did not reach the valley that day. The distance was much greater than it appeared.

He saw several rabbits in a brushy canyon, but could not hit the small fast-moving targets with his six-shooter. Hungry and exhausted he slept fitfully that night beside a small fire. By morning he was so stiff and sore he could hardly walk, but he stumbled dully onward. He was now in the brushy country of the lower foothills. Only the down-slope told him which way to go. He must get down, down to the stream.

The sun here was unbearably hot. Cactus and sage billowed out toward the green valley floor where water's magic had transformed the desert. Beyond the green, so deceptively close in the clear atmosphere, was the dark malpais cutting through the desert sage. He rested and cooled himself in the sparse shade of a manzanita, then struggled on.

A long-tailed chaparral bird scudded ahead of him. He found he had difficulty in bringing his gun from his holster. He shot twice at the running bird, then took more careful aim; but, as he fired again, the alarmed road-runner dodged into the cactus.

He was too exhausted to reload and slipped the gun wearily into his holster. Merciless arrows of sunlight struck him. He felt his body sagging like a thing apart from himself and fought to drive it on. When his tired muscles refused to obey he felt a fierce anger; then he pitched forward on the hot ground.

The world moved in dizzying circles. He managed to roll himself into the scant shade of a sage. The sun grew hotter. He was past caring. He had seen cows out on the desert as he was, just waiting to die.

A LONG time later he heard the muffled click of a horse's hoofs striking loose rock. His thoughts rose hopefully. The glistening chestnut horse, was almost on him when Tom realized his danger. He might be recognized as a member of Hatchet Scoles' gang!

A lanky, bewhiskered, bowlegged rider slid off the gleaming-coated chestnut. Tom got his gun from its holster, but the long-legged man waddled toward him, dangling a canteen and kicked the gun aside.

"Kinda drug your picket a long way, young feller. Lucky I heard your shots."

After a drink from the canteen, Tom was lifted to the saddle and the horse was led on toward the valley. He was taken to a rambling ranch house among cottonwoods. He slept and by next morning felt strong enough to push on.

This, he learned, was the Y Bench, the horse ranch of his rescuer, Chet Goodwin, an old Kentuckian who had "fit in the wah"—a tough old ranny, with a beard about half an inch long, black at the sides of his face and shading to gray on the chin.

After breakfast he jammed on an old dun-colored hat without any shape to the crown and drawled, "Come on, I'll show you my horses."

Tom saw them and whistled. "The best horses I've ever seen. Don't you find they're bait for bandits?"

"Huh! Nobody steals my horses. Too plumb easy to recognize. An' I'd hunt 'em clean over the Scissortail Moutains. I done killed a couple hombres that had notions. Now they leave the Y Bench strictly alone. I'm one hombre rustlers don't hone to mix with."

"You must get fancy prices for 'em."

"Don't sell many. Don't need much money, an' I'm doggone particular who I sell to. I'd slit anybody's throat that hurt one of my horses.

"An' they're smart. Why, take General Lee there." Chet Goodwin pointed to a sleek gray stallion with dark mane and tail. "Most of my horses can do everything but read. But old General Lee can even do that. One time I had to get to Cibola after some grub. I left a note for the General hangin' on the corral. General Lee read it and turned the stock out to water, then rounded 'em all up again and put up the bars. That's why I run a horse ranch 'cause I don't need no brains myself. Runs itself, 'cause the horses are smarter than I be." He grinned.

Tom worked with Chet around the horses that day and next morning suggested pushing on.

"On where? I need a hand here. Even if my horses are smart, they can't do all the work. An' there's always the chance that Hatchet Scoles might get the idee he could run my horses into Mexico."

Tom stayed. He worked on the Y Bench the entire summer. He liked Chet Goodwin. He liked horses. Particularly horses like these blooded ones of Chet Goodwin's. He worked hard, staying close to the Y Bench, not even riding into Cibola. Chet Goodwin liked him, practically adopted him.

Only occasionally during the long summer did riders come to the ranch. There was always the constant fear in Tom's mind that some visitor might recognize him—because of that fear he did not even visit the closest ranches.

Then one fall day he was after some strays which carried him toward the east where lay the Diamond Bar K. He did not go near the ranch buildings, but a rider coming from a willow-choked draw galloped toward him. Tom partially turned his horse and would have ridden away, but the rider hailed him.

It was a girl in man's range clothing. She drew up short, leaning tanned elbows on saddle horn, a wide smile parting very red lips.

"You must be Chet Goodwin's new bronc

twister. I'm Kay Osburn. Where you been all summer? Chet must've kept you working pretty hard that you stayed so close to the Y Bench."

Her cheery bouyancy and dancing, laughing brown eyes struck at his reserve. "Lookin' for a little bunch of Chet's horses. Trail went this way."

"They should've come over this way before. You've been a hard neighbor to meet."

They both laughed. Tom felt more at ease, yet a tension to which he was not accustomed ran through him. This was not the kind of girl he had met in the honkey-tonks below the border. Unaccustomed thoughts cut into the old bitterness in him.

THEREAFTER he rode frequently to the Diamond K, but it was the dance at the schoolhouse which first drew him into Cibola. Kay Osburn had ridden in with her cousin, Charlie Osburn, but she had hinted that Tom should meet her at the dance. The little town seemed peaceful and harmless enough. Yellow lights streamed from store windows and ponies lined the hitch-rails along the dusty street. He jogged easily through the town, up the small rise and tied his pony in the shed behind the school house.

He was just entering the school building when he heard a voice which checked him. Carl Dunn, a tall rider with whom he had ridden in Hatchet Scoles' gang recognized him instantly. Tom stepped back outside and Dunn followed. Behind the horse shed they smoked cigarettes and talked.

Dunn said, "Hear there's a horse herd on the Y Bench down in Yucca Valley that would really be good pickin's."

Tom felt something grow hard and cold within him. "That's one outfit you'd better leave alone."

Dunn whistled softly. So that's the lay. Aimin' to have 'em for yourself, eh?"

"You'd better get Hatchet to lay off Chet Goodwin's horse ranch," Tom said stonily.

"I'm not running Hatchet Scoles. No man ever did that." The tall, gaunt bandit ground a cigarette under his heel. "You know what happens to jiggers that double-cross Hatchet Scoles."

Boots crunched on gravel around the school house corner. Carl Dunn turned toward the sheds and Tom walked past a puncher toward the school house entrance.

The desks had been cleared from the school house floor. A puncher with a violin and four Mexicans, with guitar, mandolin and flute played a dreamy melody. Couples were swaying to the strains of the Carmelita Waltz. Men, uncomfortable in store clothes, punchers who had discarded only their gunbelts danced with girls in blue and yellow and vivid red.

Tom's eyes followed Kay Osburn, dancing with a puncher. Later, dancing with her, he all but forgot the menace of Scoles, and the dim obligation he owed to Hi Emory, the man who had spared his life. Kay in his arms was sufficient reward for all the risks he had taken. The sunny fragrance of her brown hair, her dancing, laughing eyes close to his, made him know there was a better life than the bitter one he had known.

It was Kay who suggested they walk in the moonlight. She had just gotten her shawl from the cloak room and was waiting for Tom when Carl Dunn beckoned to him from the doorway.

Dunn said, "I dunno why I'm doing this, but here it is. Hatchet is figgerin' on hittin' the Tumblin' D spread east of Cibola tomorrow morning."

"But that's Hi Emory's place. I thought that was going to be raided day after I left."

Dunn shook his head. "Your leaving changed that. We been waitin'. We got a tip Hi Emory is over at Wilder Gap after a prisoner. An' he's got a bunch of good beef on the Tumblin' D all rounded up to ship. Hatchet Scoles is shippin' it for him."

Dunn paused, then said, "I've got me a grudge again' Hatchet my own self, or I wouldn't be telling you. If you want to cut into his game, all right. But don't go getting any of the boys shot. After all—I've ridden with 'em and' so've you."

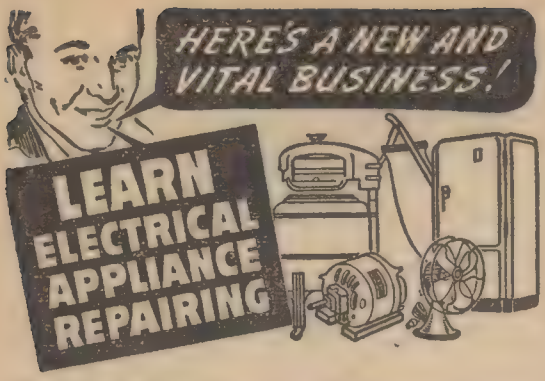
Tom said, "There are only two hombres I'd like to see shot, Hatchet and Spooky Joe Mellott."

The walk in the moonlight with Kay Osburn was not much of a success after that. Intuitively Kay sensed Tom was troubled and immediately associated it with Carl Dunn.

"Yes, he brought bad news," Tom admitted, trying to think his way clear. He hadn't heard from Hi Emory since the latter had set him free, and had felt no obligation to look the sheriff up. But this was something else. He did owe his freedom, probably his life, to Emory.

He left Kay just inside the door and went to the musicians, stopping their playing and holding up his hands for silence. Then he told them what Dunn had told him—knowing that he was starting something he might have no power to stop. There would be those, from now on, who would suspect him and those who who could and would betray him. For Hatchet Scoles told his plans to no one.

IT WAS nearly midnight when the posse, gathered in front of the small plank building that housed the sheriff's office and jail, was ready to ride. Fat Sam Lamb, the deputy, was reluctant to leave Cibola in the absence of Hi Emory.



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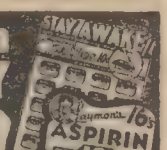

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"'Tain't safe runnin' off this way. Somebody might stick up the bank or somethin'." But he liked the authority of commanding a posse.

Most of the men were already mounted when Kay Osburn came into the yellow light cast by the lantern before the plank building. With her was a young man leading a horse.

"I'd be riding with you, Sam," the young man said, "but I just got in from Pueblo Valley. Tried to make it in time for the dance, but it was just too far—" The young puncher's voice broke off suddenly as the lantern light fell on Tom's face. "Who's this?"

Kay explained, "He's Tom Ross, our new neighbor. This is Jack Warring, Tom."

"Tom Ross?" There was menace in Jack Warring's tone. The young puncher's face was in the shadows behind the lantern, but Tom knew he had been recognized. "This skunk belongs to Hatchet Scoles' gang."

"Oh, no!" Kay denied.

"Hell! I don't forget a devil that shoots at me point blank!"

Fat Sam Lamb's voice whined, "He just warned us Hatchet Scoles is gonna make a raid on Hi Emory's Tumblin' D."

"That's the kind of trick you can expect from Hatchet Scoles. Get's one of his men in here to have you chase out of town, then raids Cibola. With you and the sheriff and half the men gone from Cibola, Hatchet Scoles will be busting in here in the morning to stick up the Cibola Bank!"

Tom insisted, pulling his horse closer toward the man with the lantern, "I've been working all summer for Chet Goodwin. Kate Osburn will vouch for me."

"I'll do all the vouchin'," Jack Warring said. "Get off that horse."

"Reckon I'll have to arrest you," Sam Lamb told him.

Rough hands hustled him inside the plank jail building. Men who had been willing enough to ride with him had turned against him.

Kay Osburn still protested. "There must be some bad mistake, Jack."

"Sure has been," Jack Warring growled. "But we'll correct it with a piece of hemp rope."

Later, when the men had gone, leaving him alone in the darkness, Kay Osburn came in through the sheriff's office in front, carrying a lantern. Her brown eyes were troubled. She looked at him wordlessly.

He said, "We'll have to get in touch with Hi Emory. Hi did me a good turn once—one I never paid back."

Her eyes searched him in the darkness. Then she breathed, "I believe in you, Tom." And was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Hatchet Scoles Deals

SAM LAMB whistled tunelessly somewhere in the sheriff's office. It began to rain, then storm. The wind whistled past corners, rain washed down in a steady sheet. At intervals loud peals of thunder shook the jail building. For a time there was light under the door which led into the sheriff's office in front and the occasional sound of movement. Then the light went out. Evidently, Tom thought, the fat sheriff had retired.

There was the sound of a footstep in the darkness during a momentary lull in the storm. A sharp click sounded. The bars of the cell door moved.

He whispered, "Kay—" but she did not answer.

Tom pushed the cell door wider and eased his body through. He crouched, feeling his way along the wall until he found the door to the sheriff's office open. Here he sensed someone waiting in the darkness. His groping hands touched a chair. He started around its back, against the wall.

A flash of lightning revealed Jack Warring crouched by the desk not over four feet away. Jack Warring's drawn gun jerked around, blazing. But Tom had exploded sidewise, hurling the chair at the young puncher. He leaped after the chair. Gun flame scorched his face. He smashed into the chair and Warring, caught an arm and twisted. Muzzle flame bloomed. Warring's arm jerked with the gun's heavy bucking.

Tom's hand caught the gun, twisting it in Jack Warring's hand. He jabbed elbows, fist and knees into Warring. With a hand on the barrel, Tom tore the gun from Warring's straining fingers, smashed wildly into the dark with the gun butt.

Distant lightning illuminated the room with a faint glimmer, revealing the desk, broken chair and Jack Warring, lying in a half-sitting position with his head against the desk, blood running down his face. Hoofs splashed somewhere in the muddy street. There was the sound of running feet.

Tom struck again with the gun. Jack Warring relaxed, his head sliding to the floor. He tried to open the door, but found it locked. The hoofs splashing in the mud drew up in front. A lantern sent faint yellow beams into the sheriff's office. Tom flattened himself against the wall.

"I was sure I heard shooting."

The voice sent ice through Tom's veins—Hatchet Scoles!

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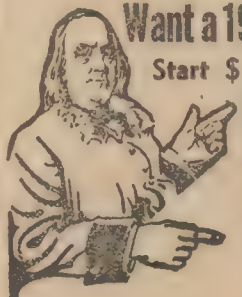

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"Jack!" fat Sam Lamb's voice whined. "Jack Warring, open up."

"You're a hell of an unreliable deputy, Sam," Sheriff Hi Emory's grating voice boomed. "Lucky I got back. If you'd tend to business 'stead of having to duck over to Chink Charlie's for something to eat—all you ever think of is those fat guts o' yours!"

A key grated and the door swung. Tom stepped forward, gun pointed at Hatchet Scoles' middle. Hatchet stopped, stared at him, hard eyes glinting in the lantern light.

Fat Sam snarled, "That's the hombre, Hi. He tried to get us to ride over to your ranch while Scoles' boys raided Chet Goodwin's horses. Now we gotta get goin' an' raise a posse all over again to get Goodwin's horses an' the hombres what killed him."

Sheriff Hi Emory's heavy voice grated, "Drop the gun, Tom. There's been enough killin' an' trouble."

Tom held onto the gun. The clop, clop of horses' hoofs sloshed in the mud down street, then turned in the darkness toward the jail. When they got here his chances would be gone. Tom shoved the point of his shoulder into Sam Lamb, knocking the lantern from the fat deputy's hand and throwing him off balance into Hi Emory. He lifted the gun muzzle, smashing its upthrust against Hatchet Scoles' chin. Then he ran through the mud around the jail as the incoming horseman came around the other side.

Two horses, backs hunched against the rain, were tied at the hitch-rack. He jerked loose a slip-knotted rein and vaulted into the saddle. A squashy wet blanket, protecting the saddle, still covered the leather. He jabbed his heels into the animal's flanks and dodged through the darkness between two buildings. Behind him rose yells and shots and the sound of hoofs.

He rode by instinct toward the malpais, trying to think things out. There was a numb, shocked feeling inside him and a confused sense of guilt. Dunn had tricked him, had played him for a fool—and now Chet Goodwin was dead, while Hi Emory rode with Hatchet Scoles! He didn't understand the relationship between the two men. There was a possibility that Emory didn't recognize the bandit—or they might be friends.

When the pony's hoofs struck the hard surface the leading horsemen were only a scant hundred yards behind him. High bushes swished their rain-soaked branches, drenching him. The uneven, hard rock slowed his horse and the men were closing in. He pulled his mount to a sudden stop behind a bush.

A few seconds later horsemen were plunging past him. He rode out with them, gradual-

ly letting his horse fall farther and farther behind. Then he pulled up and cut sharply to the left. A few minutes and all the sound of the posse was swallowed by the rain and wind.

HE SHIVERED with cold. His jacket was little protection, and the blanket, which the owner of the horse had thrown over his saddle, was now sodden and did little more than cut off the wind. He pressed the horse, but the lava was so broken and rough the animal had to pick its way slowly, stopping at times until Tom turned a little, taking a new direction.

When the light began to make the churned, broken lava more visible, he was cold and miserable. The horse was stumbling now, frequently and refusing to go faster than a very slow walk. The rain had slowed to a fine mist-like drizzle. As the shapes of bushes and stunted trees took more definite form, Tom quit urging the horse forward and sat studying his surroundings.

There was something vaguely familiar about this little swale. There was sand here underfoot. This was the edge of the lava. A stream gurgled and roared over the rocks. It came back to him then. This was the spot where long ago his burro had gotten away from him. Over here somewhere was where the roof had fallen in on a lava cave.

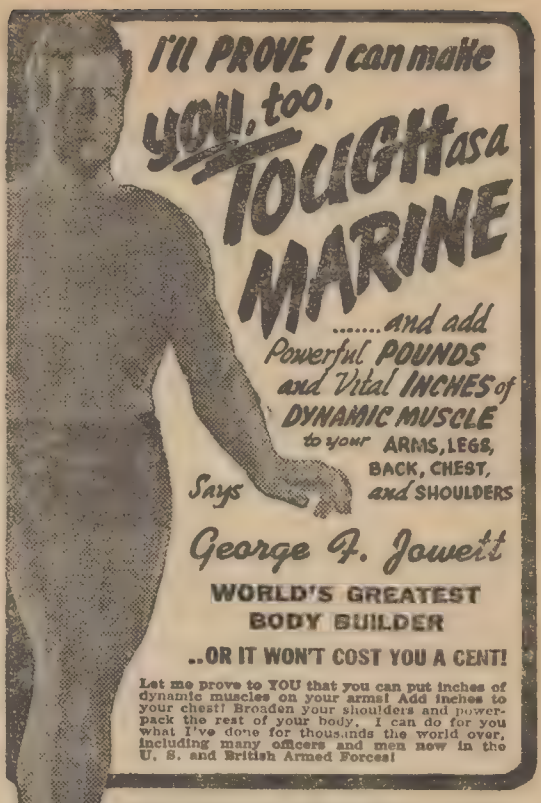
He dismounted, leading the tired horse up over the steep edge of the lava. Here, in ages past, the molten rock had run over the ground's surface like hot taffy hardening. Molten inside, with a crust forming outside, it had at times run from under its hardening shell, leaving tunnels and chambers.

He did not recognize the cave opening when he almost fell in. It looked like merely a too-steep place to descend. Then he noticed the dark gaping arch where the rock had broken down into the subterranean chamber. He remembered vividly then how he had explored this cave as a youngster.

A smooth-walled tunnel, at places high enough for a man to ride horseback, ran back a hundred feet to a large chamber, where a new tunnel branched off, to terminate again in a bulb-like chamber. He remembered there was a second outlet where the lava ceiling had caved in. He could not be trapped here.

By now it was full daylight. It was a slow task getting the horse down over the big broken rock chunks, but presently both he and the animal were in the shelter. After a struggle with half-wet twigs from a dead bush near the cave mouth, he had a small fire going.

There were only two shells in the gun he



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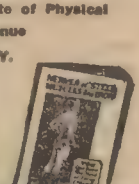

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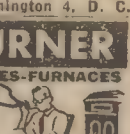

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had taken from Jack Warring. He was very hungry now and ventured out of the cave, hoping to find a rabbit; but saw men riding down the long slope not over a mile distant, and ducked back.

He raked aside the fire, covered the hot ground with grass and, spreading the partially dried blanket over it, lay down to rest. For a time he slept fitfully. The pawing of the horse on the rocky floor of the tunnel awakened him, and, lighting a stick, he led the animal deeper in the cave.

He was returning toward his blanket when he heard voices. He stayed far back from the cave entrance, but the tunnel amplified the sounds outside. "It'll be a pleasure payin' Hi Emory back fer ambushin' Jose, Emanuel an' Tick," a voice growled. Tom recognized Moran, one of Hatchet's men.

Spooky Joe Mellott said harshly, "Go easy with Hi Emory. Hatchet's got a deal on an' we got to keep him in good enough shape to write us a note."

Tom eased toward the entrance. Hi Emory was lying, bound, on the rocks in the middle of the depression, gagged with his own red neckcloth. His sandy hair straggled down over his ugly red-flushed face, but did not conceal the defiance in his very blue eyes.

"Get Emory in the cave," Spooky Joe ordered. "We'll have to get these horses down before that posse sees 'em."

Spooky Joe climbed up over the rocky edge of the depression toward the horses. Moran whittled shavings from a piece of wood and, striking a match, bent over it. Drawing his gun, Tom crept nearer the cave entrance. Spooky Joe's voice, speaking to other men on the higher ground, came to Tom, but Moran was the only man momentarily in sight. And Moran's back was turned as he worked to light his torch.

Quick surprise lighted up Emory's eyes when Tom crawled over the rocks to his side. Tom cut the ropes and beckoned for Emory to follow him. The bulky sheriff rolled to one side and tried to drag himself over the rocks. Blood covered his leg. Tom pulled the big man toward him, got his shoulders under him. He had just started down the rocks when Moran yelled. Tom twisted under his burden, fired twice in quick succession. Then the hammer fell on an empty chamber and a heavy slug struck Tom's burden. The sheriff gasped.

Then they were under the overhanging arch of the entrance and out of range.

Tom carried the wounded man to his horse, placing Hi Emory across the saddle.

"Hit you bad, Hi?"

"A scratch." But the sheriff could not stifle a groan.

"This cave's got another entrance," Tom said. "We'll get out okay."

The darkness here was so intense it was almost tangible. Tom stumbled against rocks and felt his way carefully through the caved-in tunnel.

After two hundred yards faint light showed ahead, bringing the rocks into indistinct silhouette. He had led the horse near the entrance when a gun filled the cave with earsplitting echoes. The horse squealed and reared, jerking the reins from Tom's grasp. Hi Emory's body thudded on the tunnel floor and the frightened horse ran madly back into the cave.

Tom pulled the groaning Hi Emory back from the tunnel, behind fallen rocks.

"Stick here," he said. "We'll still find a way out of this."

But he had little hope as he crept stealthily toward the cave's second entrance from where the shots had come. A burning stick had been thrown down from the pile of rocks. Hatchet Scoles, eyes glittering in the torchlight, climbed down. Two men followed. Each carried a makeshift torch.

They passed Emory's hiding place and Tom got the last man with a gun butt. As he leaped for the fallen man's gun, those ahead heard him and whirled.

They threw their torches aside, dodging into darkness. One howled, "It's Ross! Shoot the devil!"

Tom's shot answered the man and he pitched toward his burning stick of wood. The flares flickered and dimmed, leaving the tunnel once more to darkness, as he again turned back to find Emory.

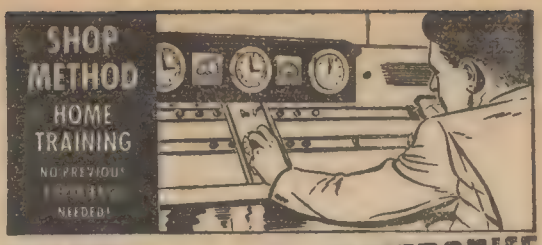
A bullet jarred his ribs. Another struck him just above the knee. The cave pulsed with sound. He threw himself flat, checking his rash reaction to blaze wildly into the darkness.

Hatchet Scoles yelled, "Now get Emory."

From deeper in the cave came the sound of running feet. "Hatchet! Hatchet!" It was Spooky Joe Mellott and more men, who had come through the cave from the other entrance.

Tom looked behind him at the glimmer of daylight at the tunnel's opening, then tightened his lips and dragged himself toward the men. He could hear Emory's gasping breath.

A man on the rocks was choking, gasping. Another scrambled back, slipping and falling into the darkness beyond the rocks. Guns roared from two points. Tom, flat on the cave floor, heard slugs pounding the rock wall above him and go ricocheting down the tunnel. A shot from closer at hand licked its



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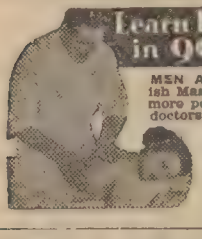

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foot-long flaming tongue inches from his face.

He aimed at the fading flash and heard the impact of a falling body. Boots kicked against the tunnel floor, then were still.

"Hatchet! Hatchet!" Spooky Joe Mellott's voice lifted. "The devil's still comin'!"

A dying torch blazed momentarily higher, sending a grotesque shadow before it. Tom dived for the vague outline of Spooky Joe and brought his gun down brutally. Spooky Joe grunted and fell.

Hatchet Scoles rose beyond the flickering light and fired. Tom felt himself going down, caught himself groggily on one knee and blasted away. He knew he couldn't afford to miss—and he didn't.

Men were running down the tunnel, shooting as they came. Tom dragged himself over beside Hi Emory, bracing himself for a final stand. A man, only half revealed by the dying light, stopped by the rocks. With great effort, Tom lifted his gun. But Hi Emory, raising a weak hand, knocked it aside.

"You fightin' fool. It's Jack Warring."

Warring kicked the gun from Tom's hand, brought up his own six-shooter. Deliberately he aimed at Tom. "You wild devil. I'm only sorry I can't do this twice."

"Wait, Jack," Hi Emory weakly pulled himself in front of Tom. "Tom's my deputy," he lied. "Only way we could get Hatchet Scoles was to have somebody workin' from the inside. We needed a tough hombre, an' there's been no more sizzlin' gun-fighter since Bill Hickok."

LATER, as Tom lay in Doc Patterson's parlor, which had been fitted into convalescent quarters for him and Sheriff Hi Emory, Jack Warring came in with Kay Osburn.

Warring said, "I've been having a tougher time than you had with Hatchet Scoles in that cave, trying to keep Kay out of here." He took Tom's hand. "An' Doc Patterson threatened to pistol whip me if I let anybody in, but I reckon Kay's good medicine." Then he went out.

And as Kay took his hand, Tom knew she was good medicine. But he was still puzzled. "About that deputy business. Haven't you got things a little twisted, Hi? If I remember, you wanted me to do something tough—tougher than deal with Hatchet Scoles."

A big grin spread over Hi Emory's ugly red face as he looked from Tom to Kay and back to Tom. "Bein' a deputy ain't always gonna be that easy." Then he looked at Kay again and said, "Besides, I reckon you'll soon have another job."

ORNERY COWBOY

(Continued from page 29)

Horn riders stared, too—ten times as long at Joe Ponkey as at the five men who had come raiding the bulls that Joe had taken care of. Lying there, his hand gripping his empty rifle, none of those men had ever seen a man to equal Joe Ponkey. All his life he'd lived alone. He was so lonesome he could never even spend the money he had earned. His cache of gold was somewhere out around—half a hundred weight of it, perhaps.

"Doggone, he stayed with them bulls!" somebody exclaimed.

They took Joe Ponkey's body to the ranch on the buckboard. They wouldn't even take the rustlers in on the same load. They sent to town for a coffin, a genuine, fancy, cityfied box and inside coffin. This was Warcry's order. "The best one in town." The coffin was fit to bury a ranch owner himself. Then they had a preacher who was riding circuit and he came to preach a sermon, giving Joe Ponkey a funeral, right!

Word that Joe Ponkey had been killed, and how it was, spread all over those parts. Cowboys left their ranches, led by their managers and owners. From town came gamblers, bartenders and their ladies. The word seemed to travel by courier, for there were men who came riding in, smoking the dust, to arrive in time to see Joe Ponkey buried that afternoon when the coroner had set and the jury had brought in the verdict.

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There they were, a thousand cow- and horsemen, some nesters and homesteaders, and the town folks, doing honor, giving credit to that cowboy who never amounted to shucks, except that he did know cows, small bunches if they were off by themselves.

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When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

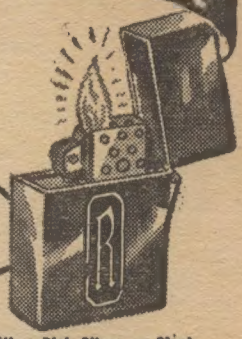
Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Biggest Smoker's Value Ever!

Windproof LIGHTER and POP-UP Plastic CIGARETTE CASE

Top slides open and pops up your favorite cigarette

BOTH FOR $2.98 TAX FREE POST PAID



A Matched Set You'll Be Proud To Give or Get

For Your Smoking Pleasure

Both Personalized

With a Rich Silver on Black **MONOGRAMMED INITIAL** of your own choice

A THRILL BY THEMSELVES . . . . . A TRIUMPH TOGETHER

Take the lighter, for instance! It's a genuine "Feather Lite," cased in gleaming heat resistant black plastic. Famed for the instant, positive action it's the favorite "flame" of smokers the nation over. Just a twirl of your thumb lights it—and its wind guard *keeps it lit.* And if you want the joy of added smoking pleasure, your answer is the matching POP-UP cigarette case, which is actually a cigarette butler too, ready to serve you on split-second notice! *Every* cigarette that bobs up out of a POP-UP is invitingly fresh, firm and enjoyably fragrant! They're a peach of a pair, both yours to own for only $2.98—and if you don't think you've bought a double value after seeing your thrilling twosome—we'll refund your money *cheerfully* . . . quick as a flash . . . *And that's a promise!*

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR SMOKER SET

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618 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

PRINT INITIAL IN THIS BOX ☐

Please rush Feather Lite Windproof Lighter and Matching POP-UP Cigarette case personalized with initial printed in box above.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $2.98. Send my Personalized Smoker Set Postpaid
☐ Send my Personalized Smoker Set C.O.D. I will pay postman $2.98 plus postage.

Name_____
Please Print Clearly
Address_____
City_____ Zone____ State_____

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Includes all This!

- ★ GENUINE PHOTOCRAFT CANDID Type CAMERA
- ★ CARRYING CASE with Your Name in 23-Kt. GOLD
- ★ 3 ROLLS of No. 127 FILM

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- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground and Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on Any Standard No. 127 Film
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- ★ Easy, Simple, Foolproof Operation

THREE ROLLS OF FILM **INCLUDED**

***Personalized* WITH YOUR NAME IN 23-Kt. Gold**

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. . . For while time stands still for no one, the memories of happy times can be preserved by Photocraft. Your Photocraft candid camera outfit comes to you ready to go to work—with a handy shoulder strap carrying case Personalized with the name of your choice in 23-Kt. GOLD, *and* enough film for 48 exposures—for only $3.98 postpaid! Your Photocraft will also take full color pictures when loaded with Colorchrome film. So whether for a gift or for yourself, order *your* Complete 5-piece Photocraft Outfit *now!* Our guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction.

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Yes, if you don't feel that Photocraft is everything you expected, you may return it in 10 days for a complete refund.

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Rush my Photocraft Candid Camera Outfit at $3.98 with Personalized Carrying Case and 3 rolls of No. 127 Film. My money will be refunded if returned in 10 days.

Name Wanted in Gold_____
Please Print

CHECK ONE

☐ I'm enclosing $3.98 in full payment. Please send my Photocraft Outfit Postpaid.
☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. I am enclosing $1.00 deposit because I want my Carrying Case Personalized in GOLD. I'll pay postman balance of $2.98 plus postage.
☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. without name on Carrying Case. I will pay postman $3.98 plus postage.

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City_____ Zone____ State_____

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Make no mistake, Calvert is very definitely *the real thing* in whiskey. Fact is, we've blended more fine whiskey in our time than any other distiller in America . . . and that magnificent Calvert blend has *yet* to be matched! Moral (and this is right from the horse's mouth): It's just plain horse-sense to make sure *your* next highball is made with Calvert.

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